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Birds, bombs, silence. Listening to nature
during wartime and its aftermath in Britain,
1914-1945

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Statement

The work presented in this thesis is my own. It has not and will not be submitted, in whole or in part, to another university for a degree.

Michael Guida

Abstract

This cultural history explores how the sounds, rhythms and quietude of the natural world were listened to, interpreted and used amid the pressures of modernising Britain between 1914 and 1945. By engaging with the sounds of nature as objects of study, the meanings of modern noise have been considered in relation to the much older sounds and listening practices rooted in English pastoral traditions. But this is also a broader exploration of human perceptions of and responses to mechanised modern life. The thesis concentrates on four listening scenarios during the period that illuminate the perspectives of soldiers, civilians, broadcasting and sound recording authorities, as well as natural historians, especially ornithologists. First, the Western Front trench experience, in which the fantasies and realities of birdsong are set alongside the cultivation of battle 'sonic mindedness'. Second, the debates about the return of shell-shocked officers and rank-and-file soldiers to the quietude of the pastoral as a recuperative environment. Third, the ideas associated with nature's sounds, stillness and silence – earthly and cosmic – that were part of the philosophy of early BBC broadcasting. And lastly, the place of recorded and broadcast British birdsong on the home front during the Second World War. This investigation has drawn upon diverse primary sources that include soldiers' writings, the archives of shell shock hospitals, natural history texts, together with broadcasting accounts in wireless magazines, the publications of BBC personnel and the BBC's Written Archive. The core question addressed is this: in what ways have the sounds of nature been part of the British social and cultural consciousness in times of chaos and threat from war and its shadow? The thesis argues that mechanised modernity has been endured and managed in part by drawing upon the security and harmony found in the sounds and rhythms of nature.

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Introduction

This thesis considers how nature was listened to and interpreted within the intensities of a period characterised, socially and culturally, by warfare. The period 1914-45 is bounded at one end by the First World War, the primary sonic event of twentieth-century society and imagination, and at the other, by the Second World War, with its own sonic character, typified by the Blitz. The thesis considers listening as a primary mode of understanding the status of the environment in which humans operate, during a period when the sounds and metaphors of modernity were often defined in terms of chaos and the urban ‘noise’ of people and their machines. Mass consumption, the blaring radio, the careless driver, were seen by some as newly threatening social disturbances. But there were other sounds and rhythms to be sensed and heard.

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of war, recovery from war and the fear of another. ‘The Twenties were post-war’ wrote the Hull poet Hubert Nicholson in 1941, ‘the Thirties were pre-war’.¹ While the trench experience in particular pressed the ear into service in new ways, 1922 saw the beginning of a new kind of national listening with the launch of the BBC’s public service broadcasting. Broadcasting quickly attracted an audience of millions of listeners and by the beginning of WWII there were more than thirty million British souls tuning into the wireless at home.² These, then, are the two theatres of listening that I consider: war, on the frontline and at home; and radio broadcasting as a medium emerging from and coloured by WWI. There will be analysis of listening in the trenches of the Western Front, in pastoral therapeutic communities in London and southern England, in the minds of early BBC broadcasting specialists, and at home during WWII.

What ‘nature’ was considered to be during this period will be examined. Most apparent will be the idealisation of the English rural (a place of good work on the fertile land) and the English landscape (a scene of hedgerows, lanes and gentle green hills). These powerful nostalgic images of an authentic England were embraced by the political left and right, as modern industrial change stimulated the need for the goodness, order and stability signified by this kind of English nature.³ Though humans were present here, this kind of nature remained conceived of as a refuge from man

¹ Quoted in Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 2.

² Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 12. The estimate assumes several people listened at once. Estimates of the size of the listening public rise to 40 million if non-licence-holders are included.

³ Alun Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

and his mechanical society. This tension between human culture and a nature without human interference underpins much of this thesis. If civilised life is considered only to be civilised ‘in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment’,⁴ how might nature be heard at all, and by whom, in the period of British history examined here? For composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer, the uncivilised behaviour of moderns has been responsible for the pollution of the natural acoustic environment. The harmonious ‘soundscape’ of nature is ruined by the wrong kinds of sound-making and listening, he argues in his influential 1977 monograph *The Tuning of the World*.⁵ Schafer does not want to have to account for the messy intermingling of human and natural behaviours and sounds. This thesis, however, takes a broader political approach by giving voice to many kinds of listeners and sound-makers, and assuming that the sounds of the natural world can only be accounted for with reference to the key cultural phenomenon of modern ‘noise’. The sounds of nature considered here can only be made sense of within the auditory environment of the modern world.

By engaging with the sounds of nature as objects of study, then, the meanings of modern clamour have been considered here in relation to the much older sounds and listening practices rooted in British pastoral traditions. However, this account will be much more than a confirmation of the long-standing appeal in the British mind of the idealised romantic rural, though this has a part to play. Both wars revive pastoral and ‘deep England’ myths, and these culturally important constructions are considered. However, this thesis undertakes a broader exploration of human perceptions of modern life through the perspectives of a wide group of public listeners (civilian soldiers of the Western Front, radio listeners and WWII home front citizenry), as well as authorities in sound (BBC broadcasters, wireless commentators, ornithologists and sound recordists) and institutional experts (medical and military authorities). Chief among the sounds of the natural world that have been heard by this broad audience of listeners are birdsong, quietude, silence, as well as the less tangible rhythms of a continuing world. All of these people are part of a story of listening to nature during and after international conflict, when hearing and engaging with such sounds might at first seem improbable.

⁴ Filipe Fernández-Armesto, *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 3.

⁵ R. Murray Schafer, *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994).

In the fields of social and cultural history and the newer, highly interdisciplinary, sound studies, in which this thesis is situated, scholarship about sound in modernity has for legitimate reasons placed most emphasis on explorations of the notion and meanings of noise. The human experience of hearing nature is muted in this academic literature, though other diverse literatures do address human hearing and listening, animal vocalisation and natural soundscapes. My topic is concerned with the threat of noise too, and the responses to sound that was unwanted or out of place.⁶ Yet my interest has been to better understand, in the social and psychological crisis of world conflict, which sounds *were* wanted or which were deemed to be *in their place*. In other words, this is to ask, what sounds have been needed in order to survive modernity, to cope with its pressures, or to manage modern modes without having to reject them outright? In what ways have the sounds of the natural world, the ones that humans have always heard, been invested with meaning amid the new experiences of mechanised life?

The sources drawn upon to explore these questions are wide-ranging. They encompass the intimate accounts of individuals together with professional and institutional voices, in an attempt to reveal a broad spectrum of thinking and feeling. Key sources are as follows: soldiers' letters, diaries and memoirs; the archives of shell shock hospitals, especially one in Enham in Hampshire; newspapers and medical journals of the period; ornithological and natural history texts; accounts of early broadcasting from BBC executives including John Reith, wireless magazines, the BBC's Written Archive; and the recordings and textual materials of nature sound recordist Ludwig Koch. Trench writing and Reith's ideas might be familiar to scholars; Enham Village Centre and Koch's radio work will not be. It should be said that this is a study of Britain, though the materials I have worked with are concentrated in England. The sources I have selected also bring in voices from Scotland and Wales, and occasionally encompass Northern and Southern Ireland. In the contemporaneous writing I have drawn upon, 'England' was taken to mean, variously, England and Wales, Great Britain or the United Kingdom, and it has therefore not always been possible to avoid repeating this elision.⁷ It is also important to say that this study examines listening in an age of empire. Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century was at the peak of its imperial range and power, and an 'imperial patriotism' to some extent infused all

⁶ In 1966 Mary Douglas proffered the anthropological concept of dirt as 'matter out of place', which suggests the condition of ordered relations that have been contravened: *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 44-5. Sound scholars have conceptualised noise as sound out of place.

⁷ A. J. P. Taylor notes that the word 'England' was used in the period of this study to cover the regions of England and Wales, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, even the British Empire: *English History 1914-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), v-vi.

classes of society before WWI.⁸ If such patriotism centred on a love of nation, participation in militarism and a disdain for the foreigner, woven into these moods was a passion for Britain's cherished natural heritage.

From an analysis of these source materials I argue that mechanised modernity has been endured and managed by drawing upon the security and harmony found in the sounds, quietudes and rhythms of nature. British nature has been characterised by three sounds: everyday birdsong of the garden, park and battlefield; the quietude of the countryside and rural scene; and symbolic silence related to the original state of cosmic nature and its terrestrial spiritual potential. These sounds of immediate presence, and at the same time of ancient authority, were often set against the arrhythmias and crash of modern life by Britons of all social ranks. It was the direct experience of hearing nature, rather than reference to the traditional tropes of English rurality, that were most potent, though the imagination certainly could combine both the present-tense and mythic nature of the past. I argue that the experience of modern life in 1914-45 did not simply provoke a retreat to an imagined bucolic past; rather nature of the present was sought out, brought close and listened to. What was heard was the energy of the sentient and physical world that could be carried forward into the new world ahead. Modernity pressed listening into service in new ways – it was a key sensory technique for knowing and warning, but also for healing, for solace and for pleasure. At a time when the prospects for human civilisation were under question, to be modern was to take British nature with you, into the future.

Four chapters develop these arguments. WWI is the start and the anchor point for the thesis, because its sonic and social ramifications resonate long after and serve to index many aspects of the 1920s, 1930s and the next war. In the first research chapter, civilian soldiers of the Western Front are found to hear the songs of birds, amid the din and carnage. As ears become trained to understand the sounds of danger, the sounds of birds too are plucked from the air to be invested with the necessary charge and meanings, and to be incorporated into rituals for survival rooted in regenerative rhythms and the escape of flight. Birds are seen to sound out against the war, their apparent defiance and resilience interpreted as a British model of behaviour. In the second chapter, the treatment of shell shock is explored in the gardens and countryside of Britain, during and after the conflict. Such recuperative rest for shocked nerves and minds in the peace and quiet of the English countryside was

⁸ David Feldman, 'Nationality and Ethnicity', in *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change*, ed. Paul Johnson (Harlow: Longman, 1994), 130-3 and 142-5.

backed by long-standing medical traditions, as well as class privilege and rural pastoral ideals about the source of the authentic nation. There were strong public calls for wounded men to be cared for carefully and quietly near nature, which led to the establishment of a new model village community at Enham in Hampshire for shell-shocked soldiers of all ranks. Its tranquil location and the prescribed gentle work routines were seen to be fundamental to the efficacy of rehabilitation. Yet it remained the only one of its kind.

There is evidence of a new sonic awareness in the nation after WWI, not just in men and women who had served overseas, but in the many more who had heard the guns across the Channel pummelling away for four years. With the commencement of the Armistice remembrance ritual in 1919, the value of quiet and silence was magnified in society. When BBC broadcasting was established in 1922, within this mood of reflection, there was an awareness that this must be acknowledged. The focus of Chapter 3, therefore, is John Reith's programming and philosophy for his new public service broadcasting project. Writing in 1924, Reith employs concepts of nature's benevolent sonic harmony to shape his vision of the medium and to inform its programming. He conceives of nature's terrestrial and cosmic 'silences' as essential facets of broadcasting that will bring moments of sublime enlightenment to all Britons. And so, the sounds of the countryside are broadcast live to the nation and the song of the nightingale becomes an emblem of British identity brought to life by the BBC. Reith wanted to do more than this, though. If radio's electromagnetic waves could connect listeners at home through the ether to the perfection and order of the cosmos, then his broadcasting might be more than sublime, it might be charged with a religious purpose.

The fourth and final chapter explores the recording and broadcasting of birdsong by German nature sound recordist Ludwig Koch. With establishment scientists Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson, Koch succeeded in modernising British birdsong by commodifying it in a new product he called a sound-book, while his colleagues linked getting to know birdsong with citizenship. Throughout WWII, Koch hosted a set of broadcasts that showcased different British birds, even demonstrating that the British blackbird's song was superior to a German one. Amid the soundscape of aerial attack, the sounds of airborne friends were invested with patriotic symbolism. Birdlife was what was being fought for; but more than this, I argue, Nicholson, Huxley and others suggested that birdsong signified a very British kind of social harmony and birdlife provided a model for civilisation when human affairs could no longer be relied upon.

In bringing together historical ideas from scientific and medical thought with those of cultural and media debates I hope to articulate new perspectives about how listening operated in Britain from 1914 to 1945. I have tried to give further insight into how men survived in the trenches, to develop ideas of national recovery after WWI by bringing quiet rest to the fore. And I have tried to show the special place given to nature, in microcosm and macrocosm, in early broadcasting philosophy and practice, while adding birdsong to existing conceptions of national culture and identity during WWII.

Literature review

The literature that informs this thesis is found in several fields. The core arena in which I seek to establish the rationale and argument for the topic is the history of sound in modernity, as I see human responses to the sounds of nature strongly influenced by modern modes of living and sound-making. I examine the topic in two more conventional historical domains as well. First is the idea of British nature, and its links to notions of quietude and the rhythms of renewal. Second is the place of nature's sounds in the endurance of and recovery from war. Throughout this literature review I will consider the opportunities and limitations of researching and writing cultural history with an emphasis on the sonic.

Histories of sound in modernity

Finding natural sounds amid the noise

This thesis emerges at a time of a burgeoning scholarly literature about the seemingly seductive problems and politics of noise in twentieth-century history. Noise is a word that appears frequently in book titles about modern sound.¹ The idea of noise has proved important in establishing not just problems with sound's loudness, characterlessness or alien nature, but its metaphoric power in suggesting disorder, social tension and the unruly masses. A recent theoretical analysis from Marie Thompson positions noise as more than a negative phenomenon.² Thompson identifies noise as a sound of power in protest or as a weapon and its necessary presence in all dialogues, mediated or not. James Mansell's *The Age of Noise in Britain* makes a different argument. His study has for the first time unravelled the debates about noise in early twentieth-century Britain, suggesting that noise was seen by medical and cultural elites as a primary pathology of modernity.³ The collection *Germany In the Loud Twentieth Century* also emphasises the social tensions that sonic studies can reveal from another cultural perspective.⁴ More broadly, the disputes surrounding the *control* of the noise of industrial, urban and media environments in Europe and America have been surveyed by historians. Emily Thompson, for example, has studied how architectural acoustics were used to re-

¹ For example: Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty, *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (London: Continuum, 2012); Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2011).

² *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

³ *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

⁴ Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill, *Germany In the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

engineer sound quality in the USA, not simply to banish noise. Karin Bijsterveld traces debates about zoning and legal frameworks to manage noise from the street, the motorcar, neighbours and aircraft in several countries.⁵

Beyond the literal and towards the metaphorical is Jacques Attali's landmark *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, in which the title refers to the reception of radical musical forms that challenged social norms.⁶ Alex Ross echoes Attali in his cultural history of twentieth-century classical music, *The Rest is Noise*.⁷ The discipline of sound studies has 'found in noise a subject of deep fascination', David Novak argues, and this has been informed by many more traditional academic areas that include history, anthropology, music, literature, media studies, philosophy, urban studies, and studies of science and technology.⁸ Novak demonstrates how noise resists interpretation, seduces with its possibilities and triggers thinking about the sounds, rhythms and order of the world, including the natural one:

It is the static on the radio; the mass of unbeautiful sounds that surrounds the island of musical aesthetics; the clatter of the modern world that indexes the lost sounds of nature; the chaos that resists social order; the unintegrated entities that exist beyond culture.⁹

In some respects, then, the category of 'noise' in the history and theory of sonic modernity is one that sets emergent and disruptive sounds of new music, different voices and technology against the origin-sounds of the natural world or a conception of an original state of calm. Is this a tension in which new vibrations are inevitably compared with established and familiar ones? Is it a deeper tension between man-made sounds and those considered to pre-date human activity? There is also the notion of noise as indicative of disorder that Novak and other scholars have considered. It is the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas that has been most informative here. From her ideas of dirt as matter out of place, sound scholars have thought about noise as sound out of place.¹⁰ However, perhaps most provocative in considerations of Douglas' work is the potential cultural associations of purity with a lack of noise, the presence of quietude, a state of nature that is ordered and untainted.

⁵ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

⁶ *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

⁷ *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009).

⁸ David Novak, 'Noise', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44-5; Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 37-8; Hugh Pickering and Tom Rice, 'Noise as "Sound out of Place": Investigating the Links between Mary Douglas' Work on Dirt and Sound Studies Research', *Journal of Sonic Studies* (2017), accessed 1 August, 2017, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/374514/374515/>.

From readings of twentieth-century British history, it is possible to get the impression that the sounds of nature were no longer heard at all and had no function or meaning for humans. It is as though the modern, and its tyrannies, entirely replaced any vestiges of the sonic possibilities of the past, and if any remained they belonged to the mythic English rural scene of the imagination. Traditional sonic environments or voices are muted in the secondary literature of cultural history, though English character (as distinct from British) is closely linked with the land, the rural and the garden by scholars such as Robert Colls, Geoffrey Searle, David Matless and Alun Howkins; the social tensions they identify are discussed later in this chapter.¹¹ The inherent associations with conservatism, heritage and nostalgia may have dissuaded scholars of modernity from studying the experience of nature's soundtrack. Or perhaps it is the thought that the quietudes of nature lead to the desire for 'the quiet life' and the contented political disengagement that might follow, taking on arguments put forward by Kate Lacey.¹² A lack of quiet can be considered a prime stimulus and technique of engagement with the world, Lacey points out. George Orwell reported in a 1946 essay how many thought 'that any pleasure in the actual process of life encourages a sort of political quietism' and brought a charge of sentimentalism.¹³

In Britain, to a large extent, the sounds of nature have been left to children, poets, pastoral composers and naturalists to enjoy and study. We might also add a small group of field recordists and, in the last 50 years, acoustic ecologists. There is an opportunity to know much more about the ways in which British people from all parts of the social spectrum engaged with sounds that did not spring from the modern world. To find any substantial secondary literature on listening to nature we have to look to the early modern period, when scholars have perhaps found such discussions more visible. America has offered up more insight than Britain, possibly because its apparent wilderness is a setting that has encouraged scholars to consider the sounds of nature, great and small, falling on the early modern ear.

In *How Early America Sounded*, Richard Rath discusses the meaning for seventeenth-century Native Americans, African Americans and European colonists of the sound of bells, guns, drums, trumpets and other musical instruments. But he devotes a chapter to the 'natural soundscape', essentially thunder and lightning. Rath

¹¹ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 203-11; Geoffrey Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 594-612; David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998); Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England'.

¹² Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 163-4.

¹³ 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad', in *Smothered Under Journalism: 1946 (The Complete Works of George Orwell)*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), 238-40.

defines natural sounds as ‘unintentional sounds, not made by humans’, but for him their chief significance revolves around their meanings as social and cultural constructions. For example, to the seventeenth-century colonist’s ear, powerful sounds were full of purpose and ascribed to an intentional being – thunder was the voice of God, battering storms were the work of the Devil.¹⁴ Spiritual forces were at work with physical ones to explain nature’s workings, but at the same time the sounds of the colonist’s new world could be threatening. The associations of nature with spiritual or religious thinking that we find here in the seventeenth century would appear to have a long-standing cultural presence, but do they persist? Rath’s work alerts us to their potential significance in the urban settings and mindsets of the twentieth century. Clearly, how sounds are heard changes over time as knowledge and culture change, but Rath points to a ‘common drive to *communicate* with an animate and intelligent nature’. Perhaps some of the beliefs and emotional connections he identifies might conceivably survive into the era of rational, secularising modernity.¹⁵

There is an interesting paradox in the American wilderness in that, to European ears since the earliest colonial days, it was a place that was both ‘silent’ and ‘howling’. Mark M. Smith’s analysis of antebellum America argues that the diabolical howling came from wolves as well as human savages in Puritan thought. And R. Murray Schafer has argued that the sound of the wind in the pine forests of western North America was not the familiar rattle and rustle of deciduous trees, but an evergreen ‘roar’ as the needles twisted and turned in turbine motion. These foreign sounds of nature (savages were part of nature) were frightening. The silences of the wilderness were also new and strange, and European settlers filled the sonic void of the wilderness with their own sonic meanings, for example in the ring of an axe biting into a tree or the relieving buzz of activity of frontier towns.¹⁶ What this work draws attention to is that new natural sound, whether howling or silent, can be troubling, especially when experienced in a new environment, and where possible humans will attempt to ‘civilise’ the auditory realm with pleasing sounds of their own making and thereby impose meaning.

In Britain, there is only one extensive historical study that accounts for the sounds of nature as part of a social and cultural picture, and perhaps predictably this too is situated in the pre-industrial period. Bruce Smith’s *The Acoustic World of Early*

¹⁴ Richard Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 11-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41 (my emphasis).

¹⁶ Mark M. Smith, ‘Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America’, *Journal of the Historical Society* Spring (2000): 67; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 30-1, 105-8; Schafer, *Soundscape*, 23.

Modern England, through a map, an engraving and contemporary accounts of Kenilworth Castle and its associated estates, reconstructs the woods, hunting grounds, fields and pastures with their accompanying sounds of work and leisure. With his expertise in Shakespearian drama, part of Smith's approach is to bring back to life the rural sounds of the past. He does this by layering the various distinctive outdoor sound environments to create a series of what he calls 'speech fields', composed of natural, mechanical and human sounds. Smith uses a good deal of historical imagination to build up the layers. First there are the sounds of nature: wind in the trees, birdsong, running water and the croaking of frogs. Then, the sounds of livestock and agricultural labour (ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting). Then, the sounds of leisure at the Morris dance, the ale-house after work and the hunt. For Smith, these layers form a hierarchy of sounds, the essential foundation of which are the vibrations of the natural world. Smith is concerned with the performative body and its utterances, yet to fully understand them he maps the sonic surroundings to create an 'ecology of voice, media, and community'.¹⁷ That all sounds, for Smith, co-exist in a kind of dynamic harmony, with natural sounds as an anchor, does not tell us that this balance was in fact perceived by his pre-industrial people. It is, however, suggestive of how, theoretically, sounds interlace and mix while simultaneously having their own culturally determined values.

Smith is interested in the acoustic drama that might have played out in shared outdoor spaces. 'As acoustic spaces', he suggests, 'forest, meadow, and fields present three different physical conditions for the production and propagation of sound. Large tree trunks without much undergrowth would form a relatively resonant space, potentially full of echoes. Meadowland, lacking any reflective surfaces, would form a relatively damped space.' He notes too that fields, while also 'relatively damped' formed a 'highly resonant space socially'.¹⁸ These subtleties of what might be described as green acoustics are just as important as the more familiar sound dynamics attributed to architectural spaces and their surroundings, one might suppose, and not just for outdoor performers. Smith has highlighted here that historical work can try to reveal the *qualities* of sounds emerging from particular places, including the outdoors, not simply the types, quantities and intensities of sounds. The subtleties of timbre can be contemplated, alongside more obvious sonic criteria. We can also appreciate through Smith's work the plentiful sonic textures that might resonate within forests, meadows and other outdoor spaces.

¹⁷ Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-7.

In order to understand the meanings given to natural sound during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we can return to America and look at the work of Peter Coates. An environmental historian, Coates over a decade ago surveyed the sonic facets of the American wilderness and the encroachment of modern life, encouraging the development of an environmental history of sound (which has not been forthcoming).¹⁹ He makes the important point that mechanical sounds and the bustle of commerce betokened prosperity to the nineteenth-century modernist's ear: 'a place where you could hear the grass grow [...] was not somewhere you wanted to be'.²⁰ It was only a few literary gentlemen who thought otherwise, Coates argues, drawing on the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom famously hear the shriek of the train's whistle as an unseemly intrusion into nature's soundscape. However, the cries and rustles of all sorts of creatures near Thoreau's cabin in the solitude around his pond were not entirely at odds with the whistle and rumble of the Fitchburg Railroad train, John Updike observes in his introduction to *Walden*.²¹ Thoreau's admiration of nature included the train – its 'commerce is unexpectedly confident and serene [...] It is very natural in its methods withal [...] I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me'.²² The quietude of nature, then, was not necessarily at odds with technological sounds, which might in fact offer a kind of reassurance from a distance. In some circumstances, it was possible for there to be a happy blending of natural and human-made sounds, even in the literary mind, a useful reminder that a nature-machine opposition was not ubiquitous nor inevitable in this period.

However, the industrial nineteenth century in Europe and the USA has been largely assessed by scholars in terms of the complaints generated by men of literary and philosophical persuasion. It is the city noise disputes about nuisance and the threat to health and thought that have been historicised, rather than industrial noise concerns.²³ In fact it is possible to see new opinions emerging from politicians, industrialists and workers in this age of industry that link sound-making with

¹⁹ Peter Coates, 'The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise', *Environmental History* 10 (2005): 643-6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 643.

²¹ John Updike, introduction to J. Lyndon Shanley, ed., *Walden*, by Henry D. Thoreau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), xvi. The shriek of the train was a standard nineteenth-century literary device to demonstrate the invasion of rural tranquillity by industrial advance. See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 11-16.

²² Thoreau, *Walden*, 119.

²³ Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 27-90. Peter Payer, 'The Age of Noise: Early Reactions in Vienna, 1870-1914', *Journal of Urban History* 5 (2007): 773-793. Raymond Smilor, 'American Noise, 1900-1930', in *Hearing History: A Reader*, Mark M. Smith, ed., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 319-331.

progress and prosperity, as Coates has pointed out.²⁴ Perhaps the sounds of nature become lost to some extent within the enthusiasm of production and consumption and urbanisation. Certainly, by the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, the foundation of urban anti-noise sentiment was present in debates about civilisation and barbarism, Bijsterveld has shown.²⁵ The problems of noise appear to have held the attention of commentators of that period as well as present-day researchers.

Solutions to the noise problem

Two key monographs have established a way of approaching the history of sound in modernity that concentrates on debates and activities aimed at resolving the noise nuisance. These studies evaluate social and technological solutions to new noise problems in early twentieth-century America and Britain. One might be said to be a story of successful technological intervention led by corporate interests in efficiency, the other a story of social negotiations to attempt to reform sound-making, rooted in concerns about national identity and class.

First is Emily Thompson's study of new acoustic practices in American architectural design from the turn of the last century to the 1930s. Thompson argues that noise abatement and required behavioural reform failed to improve the urban soundscape. Rather, the technological know-how of acousticians was called upon to re-engineer the harmony of the city, not by measuring sound, although this happened, but by working with commercial suppliers of acoustic materials to quieten offices, theatres, music halls and Hollywood soundstages. This was the 'business of sound control', but it was by no means just about quietening. Thompson's claim is that a new, clear, non-reverberant sound of acoustically controlled building-interiors was created that embodied the values of efficiency, which in turn engendered efficient behaviour and altered the tastes of those who worked within it.²⁶ Her study shows that if technology creates new sonic problems it can also be deployed to reverse or re-design them, and that the mission is then not simply one of silencing, rather a concern to optimise sonic character. The question this raises for me is whether there is evidence of debates or action aimed at optimising exposure to the sounds of nature or to peace and quiet, through new initiatives to use the outdoors, for example. Getting away from urban noise and into the harmonious and rhythmical soundscape of nature was one way that American nerves could be rejuvenated. This idea, put forward by the neurologist

²⁴ Allard Dembe, *Occupation and Disease: How Social Factors Affect the Conception of Work-Related Disorders* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 195-209.

²⁵ Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 93-104.

²⁶ *Soundscape of Modernity*, 3.

George Beard, has been explored by James Mansell in relation to the place of sound in medical debates about nervous exhaustion before WWI.²⁷

Mansell's account of hearing modernity in Britain from 1914 to 1945, the period I look at, begins to open the topic of health and the sounds of nature. Mansell explores building design too, like Thompson, but his prime focus is social solutions that involve music, characterisations of British sounds, and the development of public anti-noise education by medical and psychological elites. The emergence of the Anti-Noise League in the mid-1930s is of interest because the remedy offered by this pressure group was to call for an improvement in social manners, as much as warning of the apparent health dangers of noise and the encouragement of better machine design. Pastoral quietude was an emblem of the Anti-Noise League; the cover of their quarterly magazine, *Quiet*, depicted country villages, windmills, sailing boats on the Norfolk Broads, spring blossom and a dappled glade where a stream murmurs.²⁸ This imagery makes explicit the long-standing associations of the rural with wholesome health and good morals. One wonders if this apparently classless quiet, which anyone might enjoy next to a stream, was in fact an ideal that most urban and suburban dwellers would rarely encounter.

Mansell uncovers an initiative in WWII that is especially telling of the class dynamics at work in British debates about noise and the medical claims for quiet rest. He maps out the development of a network of 'resthouses' opened often in private homes for civil defence workers, chiefly air-raid protection workers. These places offered a few nights of quiet respite from the bombing and a chance for recuperation in the countryside. Yet Mansell finds that the Anti-Noise League organisers of the resthouse scheme were confronted by not a few workers who would rather relax in the cinema or pub with friends.²⁹ What Mansell's study highlights so clearly is that the English countryside retained (or perhaps regained in wartime) its potential as a restful site for rehabilitation of war-frazzled nerves well into the twentieth century, according to contemporary medical thought. It is also a reminder that the countryside was imagined to be noiseless and that peace and quiet were usually linked specifically to notions of the rural idyll. Mansell's work, along with others including John Carey, prompts reflection upon the fact that tensions of social class are always mixed up with ideas to do with the countryside and who is deemed to be able to appreciate and

²⁷ *Age of Noise*, 30-34.

²⁸ Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 27-8.

²⁹ *Age of Noise*, 165-70.

benefit from its gentility and beauty.³⁰ The pathologising of noise and the use of the quiet countryside as a remedy for nerves tired by modernity is a central interest for me. My aim is to trace back Mansell's exploration of these ideas, particularly in relation to approaches to the treatment of shell shock.

Since work on this thesis began, a defining set of canonical collections about sound studies have appeared which show a field maturing and gaining in confidence. Jonathan Sterne's 2012 *Sound Studies Reader* highlights the giddy array of other fields and disciplines that are part of this endeavour.³¹ Sterne claims that this breadth of thinking is based on the belief that no one field's approach to sound is enough – most people who do sound studies are also doing something else. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld have collected work that addresses science, technology, medicine and engineering perspectives in settings such as the clinic, laboratory and industry.³² Then there is Michael Bull's four-volume compendium *Sound Studies* which takes the spaces and places of twentieth-century urban experience as a particular concern.³³

Is there a question to be raised as to why the sounds of nature are hardly present in these volumes? Perhaps not, as much of this work concentrates on technological modernity. And yet, is it not the case that the sounds of the modern world are inevitably measured and interpreted in relation to non-human sounds? And that the reverse may also be true: the sounds of nature are heard afresh in modern environments? Technology itself, of course, has greatly increased the scope of what it is possible to listen to – as Don Ihde says, 'the ocean now resounds with whale songs and shrimp percussion made possible by the extension of listening through electronic amplification'.³⁴ Through sound technology we have come to know that the natural world is alive with its own vibrations. This is not just about hearing more than ever before, however. Such mediated listening is a departure from traditional ways of engaging with nature. Media redefine the limits of time and space to allow listening to be detached from the natural world. Listening can happen in new places and at new times, but perception and attention also change.

³⁰ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 45-58; Colls, *Identity*, 224; Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 235-50; Matless, *Landscape*, especially 62-100.

³¹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 5.

³² Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³³ Michael Bull, *Sound Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013). Other important recent collections include Michael Bull and Les Back, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Daniel Morat, *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th and 20th Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2014); Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson, *Cultural Histories of Noise, Sound and Listening in Europe, 1300-1918* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³⁴ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 4-5.

Listeners and listening to media

A closer consideration of listeners rather than sounds is helpful because it will bring the human interpretations of the vibrating eardrum further into focus. John Cage's thinking is a reminder that when a sound is listened to its status can change for the better. 'Wherever we are', Cage famously claimed, 'what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating'.³⁵ This is more than a comment about noise as an unredeemable paradox of modernity. Cage points to the continuous presence of sound of all kinds and to the act of listening as crucial to assigning meaning to sound.

The practice of listening has been divided by academics into several modes, with distinctions that bring into focus the politics and psychologies involved in this way of perceiving. Kate Lacey, from the perspective of a media historian, has recently argued that listening was a central activity of public life in the twentieth century, and that active listening, or 'listening out', was part of civic engagement in culture and politics.³⁶ Tom Rice, an anthropologist, expands 'listening out' to 'listening out for' sounds that humans are alert to and expecting but to which they must devote conscious auditory attention. Considered from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective, this is listening as a survival skill, employed for the avoidance of danger and enabling communication.³⁷ But Rice's formulation chimes with Lacey's in that both entail *concentration*, the former for oneself, the latter for one's community. The emergence of distracted, indifferent, deconcentrated or even unconscious listening to the radio in 1930s American has been studied by David Goodman,³⁸ and in light of this one wonders how the meanings of sound perceived in these states can be compared to those meanings composed in the more active mode of 'listening out'.

The expression to 'listen in' is thought to have become commonplace following the emergence of radio broadcasting, Susan Douglas has argued,³⁹ but more broadly it can be thought of as a way of listening with the aid of technologies that might include, apart from a loudspeaker, headphones used for military surveillance or the medical stethoscope, for example, which bring sound closer to the ear for careful study.⁴⁰ And

³⁵ Quoted in Novak, 'Noise', 125.

³⁶ Lacey, *Listening Publics*. The values and moralities of 'ubiquitous listening' to music are discussed by Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁷ Rice, 'Listening', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. Novak and Sakakeeny, 99-101.

³⁸ Goodman, 'Distracted Listening: On not Making Sound Choices in the 1930s', in *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. David Suisman and Susan Strasser (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

³⁹ *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ On military listening see J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 128-58. On sonic skills, including stethoscopic listening, see Jonathan

yet, the intimate, close-up listening that such technologies allow is worth distinguishing from broadcast 'listening in' because, as Lacey suggests, the latter can be considered to be a shared and public form of listening which impinges on notions of citizenship.⁴¹ While listening to gramophone recordings or radio broadcasts can be done alone, these practices can just as often involve group membership, social distinction and the use of knowledge, all of which can be seen to be markers of cultivated aesthetic sensibility.⁴² This prompts the question of whether listening to the common sounds of nature is subject to similar social and cultural judgements. For example, anyone can listen to birdsong, but can everyone appreciate it in the same way without guidance or the acquisition of knowledge? What many cultural historians of sound have made clear in their work is the historical particularity of listening practices and the ways in which communities have attributed meaning to sonic phenomena and environments, whether these sounds are those of human culture or of the natural world.⁴³ That is why the period 1914-45 in Britain will be treated as a particular cultural historical setting.

The history of early radio and broadcasting in the era of the BBC (1922 onwards) reveals a technological medium and its output full of potential and magic, but also fear and anxiety of what radio waves and the stream of voices and music might do to people. David Hendy's analysis of wireless cultures in Edwardian Britain shows that while listeners enjoyed the freedoms of private experimentation with cheap or home-made crystal sets, the field of early wireless was something of a dystopian realm, characterised by unease, misinformation, control and exclusion.⁴⁴ He brings an alternative perspective to other historical accounts that suggest the pre-BBC era was one characterised by openness for listeners, followed by control and closure through institutionalisation. Briggs and Burke similarly argue that with 572 stations broadcasting over the same wavelength in America and Europe by the end of 1922, there came the 'chaos in the ether' forecast before the war.⁴⁵ Underpinning these

Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Tom Rice, *Hearing and the Hospital: Sound, Listening, Knowledge and Experience* (Hereford: Sean Kingston, 2013).

⁴¹ *Listening Publics*, 141-8.

⁴² For example, the silent, reverent listening of classical music and opera audiences, where obedience to conventions of stillness and the suppression of talk and coughing are markers of aesthetic and social sophistication. See James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 84.

⁴³ In addition to the work by Mark Johnson, James Mansell, Richard Rath, Bruce Smith, Mark Smith and Emily Thompson already mentioned, several others must be highlighted: Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ David Hendy, 'The Dreadful World of Edwardian Wireless', in *Moral Panics, Social Fears and the Media: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Siân Nicholas and Tom O'Malley (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁵ Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 154.

anxieties was the question as to how radio could be normalised for a suburban domestic listener.

One aspect of early wireless radio was its capacity to allow people to hear previously unheard sounds – those at a distance, but also the presence of the ether itself, or sound phenomena beyond normal human perception, Jeffrey Sconce has argued in *Haunted Media*.⁴⁶ During and after WWI, a desire to connect to lost sons, brothers and husbands brought wireless thinking into contact with spiritualism.⁴⁷ It was the physicist Oliver Lodge who was the most influential emotional and intellectual bridge between ‘etheric’ wireless radio and the world of the supernatural.⁴⁸ While not necessarily required for spiritual contact with the dead, the ideas surrounding the notion of the ether were highly potent, and the work of John Durham Peters above all reveals this rich history in American and British thought. Peters articulates the complex ideas in circulation in the early twentieth century of ether as a communication medium, as an invisible carrier of thoughts from one mind to another, even a medium used by angels to transmit their thoughts to humans and to know human thought. Filling empty space, ether allowed ‘action at a distance’, Peters explains, even when Einsteinian physics had shown no need for such a substance.⁴⁹

This literature demonstrates the complex imaginative narratives that revolved around the new techniques of radio transmission and reception, and the continuing interest in a mysterious ether that might connect human and heavenly beings. One question that arises from this material is what happened to this swirl of ideas once broadcasting began to be formalised by the BBC at the end of 1922. More pressingly for me, were there ways in which the ether and the radio waves travelling through it were conceived of as part of nature, including its cosmic dimensions? Could the unnatural technology of radio be tamed and domesticated? These are questions about the medium. Turning to the content of broadcasting, D. L. LeMahieu has argued that in the first years of the BBC there was a pressing need to ‘transform wireless into a respectable medium of cultural exchange’.⁵⁰ If broadcasting was to be formalised, would ‘nature’ have any role in this mission of disseminating cultural content and establishing radio as a bone

⁴⁶ *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 59-123.

⁴⁷ John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 100-1, 117-18; Anthony Enns, ‘Psychic Radio: Sound Technologies, Ether Bodies, and Vibrations of the Soul’, *The Senses and Society* 3 (2008); Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ Douglas, *Listening In*, 40-54; Seán Street, *The Poetry of Radio: The Colour of Sound* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 27.

⁴⁹ Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 78-80.

⁵⁰ D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 180.

fide vehicle for doing so? The significant literature on broadcasting history from, for example, Todd Avery, Asa Briggs, Thomas Hajkowski, David Hendy, and Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, hardly touches on nature, natural history or science programming.⁵¹ Rightly enough, these scholars have concentrated on the primary outputs of music and talks, and yet there is a need to know about the place of nature programmes, broadly stated, in the first decades of broadcasting history, given the importance of both rural ideals and radio in British culture.

Any analysis of broadcasting must take account of John Reith's founding principles. Reith's vision for BBC broadcasting was 'to some extent inseparable from the man', David Hendy has argued,⁵² and Reith's forceful and unusual personality has received much attention.⁵³ His interest in the unifying ether and the mysteries of the broadcasting medium were connected to his strong religious beliefs, several scholars have argued.⁵⁴ And Reith's sparse but strictly religious programming on Sunday was defended and preserved well into the 1930s, much to the annoyance of critics.⁵⁵ If, as the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has argued, 'religious traditions have distinct repertoires of natural and unnatural sounds that signal the presence or activity of spiritual or otherworldly forces',⁵⁶ perhaps there may be unexplored sonic dimensions to Reith's religious or spiritual urges, apart from the conventions of the Sunday services and St Matthew's Passion. It is possible that Reith's religion accommodated a cosmopolitanism manifest in the mystical and spiritual that Leigh Eric Schmidt has identified in his study of American religion after the Enlightenment.⁵⁷ Certainly, the 1924 broadcast of the nightingale with Beatrice Harrison's cello has been pointed to by scholars as a moment Reith felt reflected a contemplative sound, suggestive of a much-needed silence, with distinct resonance in the emotional shadow of WWI.⁵⁸ Moreover, Hendy has recently argued that the content of early broadcasting was shaped by 'systems of feeling', as much as it was by rational policy-making, by men at

⁵¹ Todd Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922–1938* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 2, *The Golden Age of Wireless* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922–53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); David Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting: 1922–1939, Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). Allan Jones has considered science broadcasting; see 'Mary Adams and the Producer's Role in early BBC Science Broadcasts', *Public Understanding of Science* 21 (2012).

⁵² *Public Service Broadcasting*, 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20–4. See also Ian McIntyre, *The Expense of Glory: Life of John Reith* (London: Harper Collins, 1993); W Sydney Robinson, *The Last Victorians: A Daring Reassessment of Four Twentieth Century Eccentrics* (London: Robson Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ See for example Street, *The Poetry of Radio*, 25.

⁵⁵ Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 227–8.

⁵⁶ Charles Hirschkind, 'Religion', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. Novak and Sakakeeny, 170.

⁵⁷ Schmidt has pointed to books that gave currency to ideas of being 'in tune with the infinite', discovering 'the power of vibration' and 'going into the "silence."' Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 238.

⁵⁸ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 80–2; David Hendy, 'The Great War and British Broadcasting. Emotional Life in the Creation of the BBC', *New Formations* 82 (2014): 90.

the BBC looking for societal and personal stability after the war.⁵⁹ If this is right, Reith's intentions with the nightingale broadcasts might be considered in additional ways.

Beliefs in the beneficial emotional effects of broadcasting are increasingly evident in the 1930s, Briggs has argued.⁶⁰ He points to the 'consoling power of radio' and the feeling among listeners that it could be an instrument of solace as much as a broker of ideas, culture and entertainment. During WWII, the role of the radio in maintaining the nation's morale, by providing reminders of patriotic pride for example, is much clearer to discern.⁶¹ By this point, Siân Nicholas points out, ruralist pictures of the nation are very much part of the menu of programmes intended to manage morale.

Nature's unnoticed sounds: silence, quiet, rhythm

Silence is a powerful and complex concept.⁶² In the field of sound studies, Ana María Ochoa Gautier has assessed the contradictions in the concept, its place in musical aesthetics and in the politics of speech.⁶³ Sandra Braman, in her analysis of digital technology in culture, has offered the thought that 'communication becomes visible only against the field of silence'.⁶⁴ Following this idea, and an assumption that nature is deemed to be a prime source of silence, then listening to that natural tone may be a revealing process in which the possibilities of thought and contemplation emerge. The natural world may be a place that provides the conditions in which new dialogues are made. Notions of quiet, rather than silence, are often left aside by scholars, though Kate Lacey has paid particular attention to 'quietude' in relation to critical thinking in Weimar Germany directed at mediated sounds.⁶⁵ Her account illustrates that quietude has usually been associated more with a longing for modern life to be stilled than a retreat into nature to find it. However, even this seems to acknowledge that quiet is an original state of the world, before media took such a grip in the public sphere. The condition of quiet remains a fascinating and suggestive sonic milieu ripe for further analysis.

⁵⁹ Hendy, 'The Great War and British Broadcasting', 82.

⁶⁰ *The Golden Age*, 13.

⁶¹ Siân Nicholas, *Echo of War*, 233; Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 200-2, 214-17.

⁶² A useful recent overview of the territory has been made by Ana María Ochoa Gautier, 'Silence', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. Novak and Sakakeeny, 183-92.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 184-8.

⁶⁴ Sandra Braman, 'When Nightingales Break the Law: Silence and the Construction of Reality', *Ethics and Information Technology* 9 (2007): 281.

⁶⁵ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 80-2, 163-4.

While silence may never really be achieved or perceived by the human listener,⁶⁶ the term itself may be one ‘by which we understand our existence as beings in a world larger than ourselves, a world not entirely of our making’, according to Elizabeth Grosz.⁶⁷ This thought suggests, like Braman earlier, that the idea of silence is a way of measuring ourselves against the grand scheme of the natural world. The ancient presence of silence has long been associated with contemplative techniques, transformation of the self, prayer and dialogue with God.⁶⁸ Behind the polyphony of Christian silences in the bible, in monastic life and in Jesus’ ministry and witness, is the silence of God. In the Christian West the silence of the creator remained most familiar in mystical rather than in pastoral theology, Diarmaid MacCulloch argues, but in the mid-twentieth century the idea of the silence of God was re-emphasised by scholars, while at the same time it was questioned deeply with the realisation of what a supposedly Christian European civilisation had done between 1933 and 1945.⁶⁹ The idea of a silent creator of a silent universe in which humans must find their way is a facet of nature in macrocosm that I wish to explore further.

David Toop has contrasted the benevolent silence of the divine with its alternative, ‘sinister resonance’ as he calls it.⁷⁰ Silence heard and listened to can bring forth haunting myths and metaphors – the listener may draw out substance from that which is not entirely there. Toop’s analysis is provocative: fear emerges from that which will not make itself known, while silence confirms the profound irreversibility of death when all vibratory energy has stopped. In denoting the absolute zero of atomic movement, this silence marks the limit or end of the sonic and of life itself (and is thus distinguished from the category of noise which is not constrained by limits). That silence can be both a milieu for personal reflection or communication with God in certain circumstances, but also suggestive of horror and death, is an intriguing aspect of a sound that seems, to me, closely linked to the natural world, whether the sound of a still winter night, a hot summer afternoon or the sound humans imagine fills the void of outer space. Indeed, silence, and the absence it signifies, is not what is sought by most, but rather a positive environment of quietude. What might be the constituent sounds of quietude?

⁶⁶ John Cage famously reminded us that human ears hear things even in an anechoic chamber, and those sounds only cease when we die: *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 1994), 8.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 99.

⁶⁸ Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta, 2009), 116-53.

⁶⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 223-4.

⁷⁰ David Toop, *Sinister Resonance* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Sound as an index of all life, its vitality, and the broader health of an environmental system is raised by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, whose title suggests the unsettling silence that followed the pesticide annihilation of insect life and particularly the consequences for birdsong in the USA of the 1950s.⁷¹ It is a striking example of technological progress banishing the origin sounds of the natural world, and thereby denying the sense of spring in which renewal and growth of nature trigger innate emotional responses in humans. During this post-war period, new kinds of ecological awareness produced ideas of an interconnected evolutionary 'soundscape' where nature's sounds and silences were polluted by industrial civilisation, with an assumed loss of mysticism and opportunities for peaceful reflection. These are the ideas of the avant-garde composer R. Murray Schafer whose book set out an ecological and theological hierarchy of sounds that descends from the harmonious sounds of nature to the cacophonies of modern life.⁷² For Schafer, the modern world had diminished the sacrality of sound and he was clear about which sounds matter and which do not, this conservative, preservative and moralising position bothering some scholars.⁷³

Schafer's hierarchy of sounds is important though because it reflects long-standing thought about the relationship between heaven, humans and other living things whose remaining relevance becomes apparent in the period this thesis investigates. Schafer's hierarchy elevates water, wind and birdsong as sonic archetypes that feed the senses and lift emotions, and his scheme echoes constructed hierarchies of humanity, notably the great Chain of Being of Western philosophy, in which everything in the universe was ranked from the highest to the lowest – from the divine to the human, then to the rest of the animal kingdom and finally incorporating inanimate objects.⁷⁴ The silences, harmonies and rhythms that Schafer admired existed at the top and bottom of the scale, but the human life at the centre of the Chain of Being was problematic and responsible for 'de-tuning' the universe.⁷⁵ Today, Schafer's work can appear to

⁷¹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). Bernie Krause has used scientific techniques to assess the sonic environment to make conclusions about its biodiversity and health, arguing that the 'biophony' adds a layer of understanding of an environment to visual and other measures: *Voices of the Wild: Animal Songs, Human Din, and the Call to Save Natural Soundscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷² Schafer, *Soundscape*. Eric Leigh Schmidt sees Schafer's work, alongside others, as evidence that hearing failures in modernity point to stories of religious absence. Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 28-9. For an extension of Schafer's soundscape experiments, which share his sense of diminished sacrality, see J. Douglas Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 50-1.

⁷³ Ari Y. Kelman, 'Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies', *Senses & Society* 5 (2010); Andrew J. Eisenberg, 'Space', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. Novak and Sakakeeny, 198. Schafer certainly expresses distaste for the modern noise of the masses. Yet, he is the first in the post-Second World War period to fully set out the tensions between modern life and sonic change, even if his quest is often a return to pre-industrial sound.

⁷⁴ Joanna Bourke, *What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago Press, 2013), 2-3, 78.

⁷⁵ Social hierarchies related to sound-making and status have been studied by Johnson, *Listening in Paris* and by Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). The dimensions of authoritarian silences have been explored by Edward W. Said, 'From Silence to Sound and Back Again: Music, Literature, and History', *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 17 (1997): 16-20; Peter Bailey, 'Breaking the Sound Barrier: a Historian Listens to Noise', *Body and Society* 2 (1996): 53-54; Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*.

reinforce the nostalgic trope of a perfect past, ruined by modern civilisation. What Schafer's work can prompt, however, is further exploration of how modern sound interacts with ancient sonic archetypes, not to obliterate them but to reshape them in the mind of the listener. There is perhaps a more complex and dynamic relationship between old and new sounds when they are perceived in contexts different to Schafer's, especially in wartime.

Listening to nature in modernity cannot be explored without accounting for concepts of rhythm. This is not so much because rhythm is a motif strongly linked to literary and poetic modernism⁷⁶ but rather because the notion of rhythmicity emerges from the motions and repetitions of the human body and the natural world it is part of. Modern ways of life have implied an increase in pace but also a qualitative change to rhythm and a tendency to irregularity, observed for example in the changes in twentieth-century travel modes, mechanised warfare and in music.⁷⁷ Mark Jackson has argued that 'a growing sense of personal and social instability became conspicuous during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the rate of sociocultural, technological and political change appeared to accelerate.'⁷⁸ Cultural historians have examined the ways in which the demands and pressures of modernity have required the body and mind to keep in pace and tempo with its machines, media and productions.⁷⁹ Modern machine rhythms may of course themselves be altered to accommodate the human, but what happens when the sonic and temporal rhythms of the modern meet with the regular, unchanging and seemingly permanent routines of nature?

Henri Lefebvre formulated a method of analysis of modern life in the 1960s he called *rhythmanalysis*, in which the 'organic' rhythms of movement, the 'respirations, pulses, circulations, assimilations' of the analyst's body were the primary reference points to understand the modern world.⁸⁰ Lefebvre argued that there is 'nothing inert in the *world*', pointing to the garden that is suffused with the polyrhythms of 'trees, flowers, birds and insects', and then the forest, which 'moves in innumerable ways: the

⁷⁶ John Middleton Murray, editor of *Rhythm*, a literary periodical that ran from 1911 to 1913, defined modernism itself as, at root, an archaeology of rhythm. See Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 51. The projection of a modern united Britain deployed the rhythms of men and machines working in harmony in the state-sponsored public information films of the 1930s: see Mansell, *The Age of Noise*, 141.

⁷⁷ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 109-30. Such changes can be observed in twentieth-century music: Eduardo de la Fuente, *Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 20.

⁷⁸ Mark Jackson, *The Age of Stress: Science and the Search for Stability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 266.
⁷⁹ See Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mansell, *The Age of Noise*.

⁸⁰ Stuart Elden, introduction to *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, by Henri Lefebvre, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum 2004), 5-6.

combined movements of the soil, the earth, the sun. Or the movements of the molecules and atoms that compose it'.⁸¹ Lefebvre's principal concern was analysis of biological and social rhythms to reveal the interrelations of space and time in everyday life, and I consider only a margin of his work here. Yet, in acknowledging that the external world of nature is full of movement and patterns (many of which have sonic constitutions), he identifies the ubiquitous presence of non-human entities and energies in the social realm. Working with these ideas, Tim Edensor has suggested that such cyclical energies are identified by humans to help instil a sense of order.⁸² Such thinking is provocative – if humans observe and are sensitive to nature's pulsations, one can begin to speculate that humans and nature might vibrate sympathetically through a kind of entrainment.⁸³ The possibility of synchronisation of human and natural rhythms in historical studies of modernity seems to be worthy of further attention.

To summarise this literature about the history of sound in modernity, we can now see that what appear to be antagonistic opposites – nature and modernity – in fact have a relationship. The sounds of nature have not been lost in the rush of modern ways of living, but engaging with them becomes more challenging for the cultural historian, and perhaps all the more urgent. Nature's sounds are present in the academic literature as is the partner sound, quietude, and the more contentious silence. But modernity remains a special setting in which to uncover the sounds of nature and their meanings in early twentieth-century British history.

British nature: pastoral sounds, peace and identity

The persistence of the pastoral ideal in the British psyche has remained a notable feature of much of the literature about nature in the modern era.⁸⁴ Particularly striking is the recurrent framing of debate with the concept of a 'peace and quiet' that is believed to stem from the English rural scene. Alun Howkins, echoing the poet Edward Thomas, has observed how the 'south country', the south of England, has often in early twentieth-century thought stood in for 'Britain', though it is often

⁸¹ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 17, 20.

⁸² Tim Edensor, 'Thinking about Rhythm and Space', in *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies*, ed. Tim Edensor (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 7, 11.

⁸³ Musical entrainment has been explored by Martin Clayton, Rebecca Sager and Udo Will, 'In Time with the Music: the Concept of Entrainment and its Significance for Ethnomusicology', *European Seminar in Ethnomusicology Counterpoint* 1 (2005): 5-7. See also David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 16-8.

⁸⁴ David James and Philip Tew, *New Versions of Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

unclear what geography and culture beyond England is referred to.⁸⁵ What follows will largely refer to secondary scholarship that discusses England in its own right.

Although since the mid-nineteenth century England was an urban and industrial nation that excluded the experience of cottages, village greens and winding lanes from the majority of the population, a large part of the English *ideal* has been thought of as rural, Howkins argues.⁸⁶ Howkins writes of a rural England discovered in the 1880s, that stemmed from a crisis in urban society apparent in cultural productions and activities, peaking in the interwar leisure boom in the countryside. Martin Wiener too has found in the period running up to WWI a ‘deep vein of rural nostalgia’, with a striking wave of popular rural writing claiming to reveal a true England.⁸⁷ The concepts of purity, decency, goodness and honesty were closely identified with the rural south and its people, Howkins argues. In the ideal of the rural south of England, the air is clean, work has its gentle routines, there is little crime, and no violence. This moral picture, then, is quite definitively peaceful; and it is implicitly quiet. A key question for me is whether this implicit quietude, imagined or not, can in fact be revealed more explicitly during and after WWI. And within this quietness, I wish to understand what sounds were heard and what meanings were attached to them.

The work of Howkins and Wiener is fundamental to my work because they point to contemporary modes of thinking about the English rural that promise to reveal sonic characteristics and moods.⁸⁸ Howkins argues that the rural England of the late nineteenth century was representative of order, stability and naturalness in debates about the growing political beliefs in racial degeneration and urban crisis.⁸⁹ If this is right, it is reasonable to hypothesise that there is more to know about the place of the sounds of nature and the timeless rural rhythms that seemingly stood in sharp contrast to the disjunctions and unpredictabilities of urban and industrial living. ‘Nowhere in the world, so much as England’, wrote novelist Ford Madox Ford in 1906, ‘do you find the spirit of the home of ancient peace; nowhere in the occidental world will you find turf that so invites you to lie down and muse, sunshine so mellow and

⁸⁵ Howkins, *Discovery of Rural England*, 86-7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸⁷ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (New York: Cambridge University press, 2004), 46-50. The quotation is from Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 46.

⁸⁸ Howkins has argued elsewhere that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ivor Gurney and song collector Cecil Sharp brought the so-called English musical renaissance to life with reference to earlier folk traditions and the rural organicism of a pre-industrial England: Howkins, ‘Greensleeves and the Idea of National Music’, in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity III: National Fictions*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), 89-92. See also Searle, *A New England?*, 607-11.

⁸⁹ Howkins, *Discovery of Rural England*, 89-92.

innocuous, shade so deep or rooks so tranquil in their voices.’⁹⁰ Wiener draws on this way of thinking and others articulated at that time in his argument about what he sees as the pervasive middle- and upper-class frame of mind hostile to industrial and economic growth, the crash of industry being rejected for the traditions of the past.

A particular and important kind of English rural habitat is the *pastoral* because it asserts a specific contrast between the country and the urban. For Raymond Williams, in his influential assessment of literary culture since the early modern period, *The Country and the City*, the foundation of the pastoral lies in the idea that the city has removed humans from the peaceful life they once had in the countryside. Though he argues this is a ‘myth functioning as a memory’, the peaceful life of the countryside nevertheless appears to have a potent presence in modernity.⁹¹ The illusion upheld to keep the pastoral delightful, by imagining the best sides of a shepherd’s life and forgetting its miseries, was well-established in literature and poetry of the entire modern and especially Romantic period.⁹² As Raphael Samuel pointed out, ‘memory is historically conditioned, changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment’.⁹³ Following Williams and Samuel, one might ask how, in the conditions of modern warfare and its aftermath, the bucolic and pastoral heritage held within culture and memory might be required, re-enacted and reinforced.

However, Williams also alerts us to the need to define nature as something more capacious than simply the English countryside. Acknowledging that, like culture, it is a richly complex term, he expands the idea of nature to all of the material world. Some concepts of nature, Williams points out, exclude humans altogether in order to embrace all corners of the pristine earth: ‘all that was not man: all that was not touched by man, spoilt by man: nature as the lonely places, the wilderness.’⁹⁴ But there is more, because Williams’ multi-dimensional concept of nature embraces not just the entirety of the material universe but, in a different meaning of nature that he provides, the ‘inherent force’ which directs humans, the universe or both, usually identified as God.⁹⁵ Williams’ thinking suggests that in pursuing how nature has been heard and its sounds interpreted in industrial modernity, attention will have to be paid to the dimensions of nature beyond the earth-bound pastoral and the rural.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Wiener, *English Culture*, 51.

⁹¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), 43.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹³ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory. Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), x.

⁹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 77.

⁹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1990), 220.

Green Englishness and class

But if scholars raise the question of whether attentiveness to the sensual English rural not only persists into modernity but may actually be magnified by it, there remains for other writers the complicating factor of class and the intertwined notions of Britishness or Englishness. For instance, G. R. Searle's account of the English relationship with the countryside, in the decades running up to and including WWI, paints a picture steeped in a love of the Old Country, and a pastoralist affectation of faddish left-minded liberals seeking simplicity.⁹⁶ However, the rural nostalgia that can be identified in ideas of Englishness was not a 'true estimate of national character, an enduring national essence', Peter Mandler argues, but an historical construct developed at the end of the nineteenth century by the dominant classes to contain the modernising tendencies of the day.⁹⁷ Mandler also argues that nostalgic interest in the countryside in the decades before WWI was more prominent in Europe than England.⁹⁸ He is arguing, one might say, for a human interest in rural nostalgia, not an especially English one. Nevertheless, the sense of English nature as a refuge from man and his mechanical society, a place of healing, solace and retreat,⁹⁹ has contributed to the ideal of Englishness in the minds of elites. John Picker has made the interesting claim that educated Victorian listeners attained new aural sensitivities, which were then brought more widely into society, through an absorption of Romantic thought. Wordsworth's accounts of the sonic sublime, Picker argues, brought not just the sounds of nature but those of the city to the attention of many.¹⁰⁰ Cultivation of the senses might create unforeseen sensitivities.

Jeffrey Richards, drawing on depictions of national identity in British films, has argued that both the romantic right and the romantic left found rural myths and realities highly appealing. For the right, the country meant the country house, the country church, the squire and the parson, a deferential and hierarchical society. For the left, it meant folk music, the village community, rural crafts and honest peasantry. Richards points to such disparate figures as Rudyard Kipling and William Morris, Stanley Baldwin and F. R. Leavis, who over the years the rural myth would attract.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Searle, *A New England?*, 612-3. The Old Country was the title of a YMCA anthology put together for soldiers by Ernest Rhys, editor of the Everyman's Library. See Wiener, *English Culture*, 63.

⁹⁷ Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997): 155. According to Mandler, the rural nostalgia of Englishness proffered by scholars in the 1980s/1990s was overstated, including its undermining of economic progress.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 97.

Historian Alex Potts adds J. B. Priestly and Herbert Read to the list.¹⁰² Richards argues that these characters were all united by a distaste for modern industrial society which drove them back to an Arcadian golden age. If they had a romantic tendency in common they also shared the privileges of wealth, education and social status.

However, an affinity for the rural and its imagery was equally held by the urban middle classes, Potts has argued, in the most thorough assessment of the class politics of the countryside in the early twentieth century. The urban middle-class countryside was not the parkland of the landed estate depicted in the photography of *Country Life*, but a weekend picnic or a trip to Epping Forest from East London.¹⁰³ These middle-class people distinguished themselves from the vulgarity of seaside resort goers and from the materialism and mindless decadence of the country house set at the other end of the social spectrum. The story of the beautiful countryside, threatened by change, was a topic that writers of almost all political persuasions stressed, and it resonated with a large number of the middle classes, making the beautiful English rural a successful icon of national identity.¹⁰⁴ From Potts' image of a trip to Epping Forest, it seems that a study of listening to nature need not be a study of class traditions and differences, of elite discourse and the past. Moreover, if we continue this exploration of nature by bringing it closer to home, there may be more to say about the wide appeal and engagement with nature.

To extend the vision of British nature from William Blake's green and pleasant land of England and the somewhat abstract notion of the pastoral, the home garden and its substantial metaphors should be considered. The garden, or allotment, was a pleasure shared by all classes, and the most intimate connections to nature might happen here, Robert Colls argues.¹⁰⁵ The socialist-inspired garden city ideas of Ebenezer Howard promised social health and harmony that rebalanced the human relationship with nature, according to Brett Clark.¹⁰⁶ And Searle has added to this, saying that 'the planners attributed quasi-mystical powers' to the generous allocations of land for gardening and working a smallholding in garden cities.¹⁰⁷ In the early twentieth century, England was considered to be a garden, Robert Colls argues, 'because its

¹⁰² Alex Potts, "Constable Country" Between the Wars', in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity III: National Fictions*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), 175.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁰⁵ *Identity of England*, 205. The sensory pleasures of the garden are rarely captured by scholars; recent studies using 1998 Mass Observation data suggest ordinary gardens offered emotional peace because of the quietude, bees and birdsong found there. See Mark Bhatti et al., "I Love Being in the Garden": Enchanting Encounters in Everyday Life', *Social & Cultural Geography* 10 (2009).

¹⁰⁶ Brett Clark, 'Ebenezer Howard and the Marriage of Town and Country', *Archives of Organizational and Environmental Literature* 16 (2003): 87, 93; see also Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁷ *A New England?*, 611.

climate is temperate and its people are mild'.¹⁰⁸ During WWI the English garden was peace, a place without conflict and a sonic realm of tranquillity and calm. This 'true spirit' of England as a garden was far deeper than that of the more political 'state-and-nation spirit', Colls insists; it represented the glory and beauty the English found in the land and people living together softly and naturally.¹⁰⁹ Colls points to Priestley in 1929 representing the English mind as an English landscape, 'rather temperate and hazy, with mists, and impossible to know by any straight, rational path. The mental life of the English was shaded. Their humour(s) were blurred and kindly'.¹¹⁰ From the literature above, and Potts reinforces this, we find narratives of English landscape defined by restraint, reticence and politeness, matched by English character.¹¹¹ There are intimations of the sonic here too – they are not obvious but they are there. The English appear to have been a quiet lot, or at least they liked to think of themselves in this way.

One begins to wonder if the small sounds of the countryside and the garden are fundamentally attractive to the English because of something in their view of their essential make-up. Paul Langford's work suggests, through the accounts of foreign observers in the eighteenth century, 'a certain calmness and serenity, a notable tranquillity of spirit'.¹¹² Though Langford finds many English traits, one constant characteristic of the Englishman was taciturnity.¹¹³ No other nation was so fearful of 'wasting words'. Talking too much was virtually the definition of a bore, and the English labourer seemed as wordless as the English gentleman. The English language itself had a rich range of derisive expressions for useless talk. 'Jabber, babble, chatter, patter, blabber, prattle, tattle, blather' suggested something of the contempt in which the English held undirected speech. Silence went with a wise mind and a modest manner – talkativeness implied ignorance and egotism.¹¹⁴ Langford's intriguing work does not deny that observers saw what they were led to see, and Mandler's comparative work with other European countries shows that the presumed characteristics of the English can be found more vividly elsewhere, but these ideas are thought-provoking nonetheless. For me, they raise the question of whether the English in the early twentieth century bring with them and re-enact the tranquil traits that Colls and Langford identify because they are following traditions with historical,

¹⁰⁸ *Identity of England*, 203

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹¹¹ Potts, "Constable Country", 175.

¹¹² Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177-8.

cultural and political resonance, and how such recognised traits might be re-enforced in times of crisis and technological transformation.

During the interwar period, as youth hostellers, scouts, hikers, ramblers, National Trusters, Green Belters, garden city citizens, organicists and nudists communed in new ways with the countryside, they were in part motivated by the search for peaceful relaxation, Colls argues.¹¹⁵ Ensuing disputes about the use and overuse of the countryside were distinctly class-based, elites focusing on the uncontrolled sonic and visual disturbances of the uncultivated masses, as they could be portrayed.¹¹⁶ These disputes about the countryside were also, perhaps, about the perceived invasion of sacred national landscapes. David Matless has argued that the interwar outdoor movement, preservationists in particular, presented 'nature as both a universal and a national spiritual resource'. Campaigners for national parks aimed to encourage the urban population to regain contact with nature, which was needed for the spiritual welfare of the nation.¹¹⁷ The argument that sensory perception rather than intellectual reflection was a means to achieving such spiritual well-being made it potentially open to all. But the peace would have to be kept. Matless quotes Vaughan Cornish, a preservationist and planner who also reflected mystical ideas in circulation at the time: 'the quietness of the scene is essential, for only in quietude can Man hear the voice of Nature and receive its message of eternal truth'.¹¹⁸ This nature mysticism was not as widespread as the phenomenon of weekend hiking and camping, but it does give an indication of the currents of thought associated with the precious countryside. Though Matless' foundational study looks at attitudes to landscape to understand Englishness, the soundscape must surely provide other kinds of clues. The scenery, after all, is made of the ancient past, whereas the sounds of nature can signal vital energy in the present moment, suggestive of alternative spiritual possibilities and national identities. Birdsong is a case in point.

Birdsong in culture

There is a subset of historical writing about nature, produced in the last four decades, that demands my attention. It concerns birds and their song in British culture. Birdsong has usually been the concern of naturalists and ornithologists and, of course, poets. Academic cultural and historical perspectives of this foremost of Britain's

¹¹⁵ *Identity of England*, 224.

¹¹⁶ See for example Jon Agar, 'Bodies, Machines, Noise', in *Bodies/Machines*, ed. Iwan Rhys Morus (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson, *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006); Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 46-92.

¹¹⁷ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 84.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

natural sounds are hard to come by, though reports of the first cuckoo in *The Times* and Frederick Delius' tone poem of 1912 depicting the same appear to be still in recent cultural memory.¹¹⁹ If it is true as Schafer claims that 'no sound in nature has attached itself so affectionately to the human imagination' then it seems surprising that it has received so little scholarly interest beyond biological study.¹²⁰ It must be noted that birdsong was far more common in the early twentieth century than it is today. Nightingales have declined by around 90% in the last 40 years in the UK, and today can only be heard in a handful of locations in the south of England.¹²¹ Yet even in our depleted times, Peter Cusack's recent work in cities around the world shows the remarkable co-presence of the sounds of nature and the sounds of the modern urban in the results of his Favourite Sounds research. Birdsong, train and underground sounds rank equally highly in the lives of people today.¹²²

As animals, birds have received brief attention from historians for their role in twentieth-century warfare,¹²³ though only fleeting coverage in foundational texts on animal-human history.¹²⁴ Like others with environmental interests pricked by Rachel Carson's 'silent spring', Bernie Krause, the musician and sound ecologist, has recently explored the relationship between the health of the living natural environment and its 'biophony', as he calls it, birds and insects being a prominent component of this sound world.¹²⁵ Krause's work is significant because he argues that a healthy state of nature can be heard in a rich and harmonious soundscape, one that has evolved over millions of years. The sense of hearing an ancient sound in birdsong that predates human sound-making seems likely to be something that is more than scientific knowledge – perhaps it is a human intuition of non-experts from all eras. Andrew Whitehouse's recent anthropological work about listening to birds in the Anthropocene is useful in stimulating reflection upon the significance of bird sounds to people's sense of place, time and season, and the longing that humans can have for their own lives to resonate with the birds around them.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ Kenneth Gregory, *The First Cuckoo: Letters to The Times since 1900* (London: Unwin, 1978).

¹²⁰ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 29.

¹²¹ From *British Birds*, the monthly birdwatchers' journal, accessed 1 August, 2017, <http://britishbirds.co.uk/article/nightingales-sing-again-after-90-years/>.

¹²² Peter Cusack, 'The Favourite Sounds Project', in *Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetics to Creativity*, ed. Stephanie Bunn (Routledge, forthcoming).

¹²³ Juliet Gardiner, *The Animals' War: Animals in Wartime from the First World War to the Present Day* (London: Portrait, 2006), 98-105, 116.

¹²⁴ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Nigel Rothfels, 'How the Caged Bird Sings: Entertainment and the Exhibition of Animals', in *A Cultural History of Animals. Volume 5: The Age of Empire (1800-1920)*, ed. Kathleen Kete (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 95-112.

¹²⁵ Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (London: Profile Books, 2012).

¹²⁶ Andrew Whitehouse, 'Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World', *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015).

To gain an understanding of the social and cultural responses to birdsong in the last 150 years, we turn to a small group of writers of literary persuasion who have produced often highly personal accounts, such as Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey.¹²⁷ Only Mark Rothenberg has specifically concentrated on *Why Birds Sing*, as he calls his book, and what happens to humans when they do. Simon Armitage and Tim Dee have offered a useful guide to birds in British poetry, which reminds us that birds have been heard as much as seen, and that the first bird-watchers who left descriptions of what they encountered were poets.¹²⁸ It is only Helen Macdonald, a historian of science, who has made a concerted and thought-provoking assessment of amateur scientific cultures of bird observation, in her study looking at 1930 to 1955.¹²⁹ She argues that birdsong could stand for the nation, especially in times of threat, and finds that getting to know birds in an organised way could even be seen to be legitimate war work. The relationship between birds and their song and citizenship deserves further attention, especially as Macdonald finds that ornithological experts like Julian Huxley, Max Nicholson and James Fisher – whose thinking I investigate – contributed to a discourse about national and social identities in the approach to and during WWII.¹³⁰

What this flurry of nature writing hints at, collectively, is the symbolic significance of birdsong, its developing and changeable meanings in culture, and, in particular, the possibility of some sort of link with what it means to be a modern human, as well as a British subject. This section also has found much attention directed at interpreting the apparent British love-affair with the English countryside and its characterisation as a peaceful realm, not unlike the national temperament. These potent myths will be examined further in this study of listening to nature, which, we have found, can be more than a familiar narrative of class traditions and differences.

¹²⁷ Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey, *Birds Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005); Mark Cocker, *Birds and People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013); Richard Mabey, *Whistling in the Dark: In Pursuit of the Nightingale* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993). See also Stephen Moss, *A Bird in the Bush: A Social History of Birdwatching* (London: Aurum, 2004); Jeremy Mynott, *Birdscapes: Birds in Our Imagination and Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Joeri Bruyninckx, 'Sound Science: Recording and Listening in the Biology of Bird Song, 1880-1980', (PhD diss., University of Maastricht, 2013).

¹²⁸ Simon Armitage and Tim Dee, *The Poetry of Birds* (London: Penguin, 2011), xix-xx.

¹²⁹ Helen Macdonald, "'What Makes you a Scientist is that Way you Look at Things': Ornithology and the Observer 1930-1955', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 33 (2002).

¹³⁰ That birdsong is interpreted according to historical and cultural contingencies is perhaps most markedly demonstrated by Steven Feld's canonical work about the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, that showed how certain birds of the rainforest were understood to be the voices of ancestors calling to their living relatives. Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*.

War: soldiers and citizens enduring and recovering

The sounds of war are of course a context, *the* sonic context in fact, for listening to nature in this thesis. But it is the broader psycho-social tensions of the presence and aftermath of war, not simply the terrible noise of technology, that I will attempt to examine in relation to nature that was heard. In combat and on the home front, in times of recovery and defining new ways ahead, what kinds of social relationships were there with the sounds of nature?

Listening to and hearing the sounds of conflict

Sound studies scholarship has made clear the politics of power and control that the sonic can reveal. Mark M. Smith has demonstrated that the way in which sounds are comprehended by different sections of society is profoundly affected by hierarchies under tension and positions of power.¹³¹ And in her study of National Socialism in Germany, Carolyn Birdsall has argued that sound can be used and instrumentalised by authority to bring individuals into community or national frameworks.¹³² Several scholars have shown that the sounds of military technology can be deployed to create fear, no longer a by-product of warfare, but a deliberate instrument of violence.¹³³ Indeed, the battle cry and the beat of drums were part of the performance of war before gunpowder dominated the sound of warfare.¹³⁴ The psychological effects of bombardment in the trenches and of the Blitz across Britain in WWII can be considered in light of this construction of fear.

For those immersed in conflict, knowing the sonic environment was crucial information. There is a growing literature that demonstrates how, in the trenches of Flanders and France, listening to the sounds of projectiles and explosions became a required skill that could improve the likelihood of survival. Eric Leed noted in 1979 that with the enemy often too difficult and dangerous to see through smoke or over the parapet of the trench, 'hearing became much more important than vision as an index of what was real and threatening',¹³⁵ and recently Yaron Jean has usefully called this behaviour in his study of German troops 'sonic mindedness', a method of

¹³¹ Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*; Paul Moore, 'Sectarian Sound and Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 265-79.

¹³² *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

¹³³ Greg Goodale, *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 106-31, 173-7; Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 15-26, 205-9.

¹³⁴ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 49-50.

¹³⁵ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 19-20, 124.

distinguishing between safety and danger by training the ear to know the sounds of different weaponry.¹³⁶ How might such a re-calibrating of the auditory sensorium have affected the ways in which other sounds, including those of nature, were heard and interpreted?

Paul Fussell began to illuminate this question in his analysis of literary outputs from 1914-18 when he argued that a 'recourse to the pastoral' was an English mode of both 'fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them'.¹³⁷ There are glimpses in the soldiers' writing that Fussell unearths of a rapt interest in nature's quietude and the witnessing of birds and their song in the troglodyte world of the trenches.¹³⁸ Though Fussell offers scant evidence, there is the suggestion that birds have a striking presence in men's minds. Yet Fussell's devotion to the poetic and symbolic value of pastoral themes in soldiers' writing and to the literary imagination largely obscures the perhaps more tangible contribution of the lived experience of the combatant.

The work of Axel Volmar brings to the fore that the imperative of constant vigilance meant frontline soldiers lived intensely in the present.¹³⁹ This insight suggests a need to interrogate more closely the evidence of how soldiers' immediate and present-tense responses were related to the soundscape around them. Moreover, given the pastoral ideals discussed in the previous section, it will be necessary to ask one further question: whether the sonic experiences of those in the trenches can best be understood *in relation to* those deeply-held attitudes to nature that soldiers brought with them. Larks and nightingales, which were recognised from Britain as special singers and the iconic subjects of poetic expression, certainly caught the attention of Fussell's literary types.¹⁴⁰ Recently, John Lewis-Stempel has argued that comrade horses and pets, and to a lesser extent birds, provided vital pleasure and preoccupation to men of all ranks.¹⁴¹ However, the intriguing work of Fussell and Lewis-Stempel is too fleeting to allow us to know how widespread engagement with birdlife was across ranks, or the kinds of meaning it might be given. A deeper

¹³⁶ Yaron Jean, 'The Sonic Mindedness of the Great War: Viewing History through Auditory Lenses', in *Germany In the Loud Twentieth Century*, ed. Feiereisen and Merley Hill, 51-62. See also Hendy, *Noise*, 272-5; Elizabeth Bruton and Graeme Gooday, 'Listening in Combat – Surveillance Technologies Beyond the Visual in the First World War', *History and Technology* 32 (2016). For German perspectives see Axel Volmar, 'The Soundscape of World War I and its Impact on Auditory Media Culture during the Weimar Period', in *Sounds of Modern History*, ed. Morat, 227-55; Julia Encke, 'War Noises on the Battlefield: On Fighting Underground and Learning to Listen in the Great War', *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 37 (2015).

¹³⁷ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press), 235. Fussell's chapter 'Arcadian Recourses' is particularly important to this research.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 242-3

¹³⁹ *Soundscape of World War I*, 231.

¹⁴⁰ *The Great War*, 241-3

¹⁴¹ John Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, the Great War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), 27-77.

investigation of contemporary sources may provide a more nuanced understanding of bird sounds in the trenches.

In WWII, we are drawn to the Blitz as the central sonic manifestation of the conflict that affected many Britons, remembering that ports and cities across Britain were subjected to German bombing from the air. The Blitz is historically important if for no other reason than it was the first and likely the last sustained aerial bombardment of the country, Angus Calder has pointed out.¹⁴² The kinds of listening that happened during those nine months are unique in this respect. And yet little specific scholarly attention to the sonic character of WWII has been forthcoming. The work of Mansell, which concentrates on the control of sound-making, and Peter Adey's work on fear of bombing raids, are notable exceptions.¹⁴³

Most research into this period stresses the extent to which myth-making sustained morale through evocations of British moral pre-eminence, but also, if more mutedly, acknowledges that such myths had a real and perceptible effect on shaping contemporary feeling. Calder, of course, but also many others, including Sonya Rose and Siân Nicholas, have considered the Blitz as a time that supported and reconstituted myths about the nation as a pastoral Eden.¹⁴⁴ The national mythology about the English countryside has been mobilised at times of political tension to summon an essence of true Englishness, 'an ideal for which it's worth killing foreigners and pulverising their less leisured and civilised landscapes', Potts argues.¹⁴⁵ Part of this true English essence is likely to reside in the sonic character of the rural, though as we have seen it is not easy to detect in the literature. Mansell highlights another national sonic essence, that of church bells, which were he argues associated with cherished rural village identity as much as their place in spiritual life.¹⁴⁶ What begins to emerge here is evidence that the myths of wartime Britain included elements of sonic character which have yet to be fully revealed.

The literature provides fragments of evidence that the everyday emotional pressures of life on the home front were in part a function of listening out in anticipation of danger heralded by sirens, aircraft sounds, bombs falling and detonating, and the all-

¹⁴² Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 1.

¹⁴³ Mansell, *Age of Noise*, 145-81; Peter Adey, 'The Private Life of an Air Raid. Mobility, Stillness, Affect', in *Stillness In A Mobile World*, ed. David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁴⁴ Calder, *Myth*, 180-208. Calder explores the mythology of 'deep England'. For analyses of the rural in British culture throughout the war, see Nicholas, *Echo of War*; Rose, *Which People's War?*, 197-238; Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill, *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 1-32; Tony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

¹⁴⁵ "Constable Country", 160.

¹⁴⁶ *Age of Noise*, 152-61.

clear. This listening out for danger was accompanied by listening to the radio for news about the war and for the tonic of music.¹⁴⁷ The official predictions of mass air-raid neurosis failed to materialise, but the home front population were nevertheless under routine psychological stress and anticipation.¹⁴⁸ Angus Calder argues that Britain in 1940 ‘provided ample evidence, familiar and unfamiliar, to indicate widespread fear and paranoia bordering on panic’.¹⁴⁹ Joanna Bourke suggests that blackouts in villages put the nerves on edge as much as in towns and cities.¹⁵⁰ Listening happened in the dark, blind, but with spatial awareness working overtime. Adey’s work with the Mass Observation archives has shown that the stillness that preceded a bombing raid, filled by anticipatory feelings of what might happen, was almost as fearsome as the siren, drone, whistle or explosion.¹⁵² Vignettes of the sonic impact of the Blitz have to be pieced together in this way – they have not yet been brought together and studied by sound historians. We have to go back to Calder, who gives one of the most plangent accounts gleaned from reports from an air-raid warden and Graham Greene (the ‘warbling’ siren, uneven throb of bombers, howling of dogs, high explosive detonations, anti-aircraft guns, walls collapsing, crackle of flames, bells of the fire engines, the dust and the evil smells).¹⁵³ These overwhelming sensory circumstances are the context in which any engagement with the sounds of nature might have occurred. Yet they are vignettes that are part of a broader sonic picture that remains to be assembled.

National recovery through silence and the land

In order to assess academic work about the place of sound in wartime recuperation we need to return to WWI, not least because the phenomenon of shell shock can hardly be separated from the cultural history of this period. Though noise has still, in today’s literature, a role in the causation of shell shock, as Jay Winter’s recent work shows,¹⁵⁴ the requirement for quiet as the basis for shell shock recovery has been discussed by few scholars; rather the array of disciplinary, physiological and psychological methods have been the focus.¹⁵⁵ Brendan Kelly and Fiona Reid have however looked briefly at

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas, *Echo of War*.

¹⁴⁸ Edgar Jones et al., ‘Civilian Morale During the Second World War: Responses to Air Raids Re-examined’, *Social History of Medicine* 17 (2004): 464-5; Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 174-5.

¹⁴⁹ Calder, *Myth*, 109; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 179.

¹⁵⁰ Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 2006), 229.

¹⁵² ‘The Private Life of an Air Raid’, 128-9.

¹⁵³ Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-45* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 170-1.

¹⁵⁴ Jay Winter, ‘Shell Shock’, in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 310-33. For useful psychiatric accounts see Edgar Jones, ‘Shell Shock at Maghull and the Maudsley: Models of Psychological Medicine in the UK’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 65 (2010); Edgar Jones, Nicola Fear and Simon Wessely, ‘Shell Shock and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury: A Historical Review’, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164 (2007).

¹⁵⁵ The historiography of shell shock is vast, though its treatment has perhaps received less attention than analyses of the medical and political debates about its nature. Key texts include: Shephard, *A War of Nerves*; Peter Barham,

use of quiet in the recovery programmes of shell-shocked men sent home. Kelly's work has drawn attention to the references to quiet rest in the 1922 *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock'* and found, in his own research, contemporary practices that emphasised quietude to be important at Dublin's Richmond War Hospital.¹⁵⁶ Reid examines the fate of men who were in a position to rebuild their lives with the help of family, the state and organisations like the Ex-Servicemen's Welfare Society. She highlights the use of quiet rest, stemming from the nineteenth-century rest cure, arguing that 'the most obvious and consistent characteristic of government plans for the post-war care of shell-shocked men lay in its commitment to a rural system of treatment'. Moreover, Reid believes that the provision of this harmonious rural system of care and treatment for mentally wounded men was part of regenerating a Britain that had been damaged not just by war, but by the degeneracy of pre-war society.¹⁵⁸ These are significant claims, but there is as yet little evidence apart from these initial explorations from Reid and Kelly to develop these ideas. If a rural system of care was prominent in shell shock recovery, it deserves further exposure in relation to the role of the sonic. For the population as a whole, it seems likely that the appeal of anywhere which offered peace and quiet would have been pronounced, after four years of listening to the guns being fired across the Channel that Caroline Dakers has noted.¹⁵⁹

Importantly then, the place of quietude in recovery from shell shock is largely an implicit one. The challenge for future work in this area is to find ways to make it more explicit and to find specific links, if there are any, with the British countryside. It may be that Florence Nightingale, in her wards in the Crimea, was the first modern medical mind to formalise the need for quiet in the recovery of soldiers. Hillel Schwartz has argued that Nightingale's ideas about the need for nurses to control their voices and movements may have been linked to the traditions of quiet rest in

Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Peter Leese, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Jason Crouthamel and Peter Leese, *Psychological Trauma and the Legacies of the First World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005); Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Paul Lerner, 'Psychiatry and Casualties of War in Germany, 1914-18', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Virago, 1987); Ted Bogacz, 'War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22: The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell-Shock"', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (1989); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1999); Jay Winter, 'Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000); Tracey Loughran, 'Hysteria and Neurasthenia in Pre-war Medical Discourse and in Histories of Shell-Shock', *History of Psychiatry* 19 (2008); Fiona Reid, *Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain: 1914-1930* (London: Continuum, 2010); Fiona Reid, *Medicine in First World War Europe: Soldiers, Medics, Pacifists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁵⁶ Brendan Kelly, 'He Lost Himself Completely': *Shell Shock and Its Treatment at Dublin's Richmond War Hospital, 1916-1919* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2014), 61-83.

¹⁵⁸ Reid, *Broken Men*, 75-7.

¹⁵⁹ Caroline Dakers, *The Countryside at War* (London: Constable, 1987), 112.

sanatoria and the therapeutic quietude of Quaker-run asylums, but that they also stemmed from her devout Unitarian beliefs, her class and gender.¹⁶⁰ Nightingale seems to have had a sense of what the correct atmosphere for healing should be and this could include music, Helen Tyler observes, an idea Nightingale supported in experiments in London hospitals in the 1890s with what we might now call music therapy.¹⁶¹ How her ideas were manifested in WWI nursing practice and in the care of men in its aftermath is unclear.

The shock of what the war had done and what it meant for the future of Britain was keenly felt across society, many scholars have intimated, though most do not go much further than this, because tracing the lives of men who were silenced by their war experiences is particularly difficult.¹⁶² Michael Roper has made innovative use of family accounts in order to get closer to personal trauma and the ripples of emotional experience in communities and across generations.¹⁶³ As Roper and others have shown, the phenomenon of shell shock cannot be separated from the fabric of modern Britain.¹⁶⁴ 'Shell shock' as a term escaped from medical discourse to become a metaphor for the damage the war had inflicted upon the British people, Jay Winter argues.¹⁶⁵ The shock was reflected in a pervasive mood of anxiety that settled across interwar Britain, a period Richard Overly has called the Morbid Age. Recovery from the damage of war was undertaken amid fears that centuries of the civilising process had been undone in the West, that capitalist economic and political chaos were inevitable.¹⁶⁶ Samuel Hynes has insisted that all thought and action of all men and women in the decades following the war was tinged by the loss from culture of romance, leaving an anxious pacifist spirit among many.¹⁶⁷

If this was the mood that prevailed throughout the aftermath of WWI, it was perhaps, in some sense, accompanied by its own silence, because what had happened could not yet be easily articulated, at least by many soldier-writers who only started to publish

¹⁶⁰ Hillel Schwartz, 'Inner and Outer Sancta: Earplugs and Hospitals', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, 274-80. For a depiction of some of the London debates about the problem of street noise interfering with convalescence at home, see Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 73-5.

¹⁶¹ Helen M. Tyler, 'The Music Therapy Profession in Modern Britain', in *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy Since Antiquity*, ed. Peregrine Horden (London: Routledge, 2000), 375-94.

¹⁶² Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (Harlow: Pearson, 1996); Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁶³ Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

¹⁶⁴ Bourke, *Dismembering*, 11-13; Marwick, *The Deluge*, 15-18.

¹⁶⁵ 'Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War', 7-11.

¹⁶⁶ Overly, *The Morbid Age*.

¹⁶⁷ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 465.

work addressing the war after almost a decade, as literary historians have noted.¹⁶⁸ Adrian Gregory's study of the Armistice ritual underlines how the status and meanings of silence in society changed after the two minutes of remembrance was enacted in November 1919. It was an act, he argues, given amplified meaning through its banishment of modern noise: 'It was urban Britain which felt the sensation of silence most powerfully'.¹⁶⁹ One of the ways in which bereaved communities endeavoured to find collective solace was by referring back to traditional motifs and rituals in social and cultural life, art and religion. These traditions, Jay Winter has argued, provided a way for the bereaved to 'live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind'.¹⁷⁰ What were these comforting traditions?

Though Winter does not dwell on the traditions of the rural, there is evidence that the countryside had a broad appeal to many after the war. It was not just literary men who wanted to get away, even if historians alight on these examples. Yes, Ford Madox Ford said that he 'got over the nerve-tangle of war' in 1923, after 'hibernating' in the Sussex countryside with a sympathetic woman and gently writing through his wartime experiences,¹⁷¹ and Private Henry Williamson locked himself away in his Devon cottage to write *Tarka the Otter*.¹⁷² But Lewis-Stempel points out that government legislation for homecoming soldiers was enacted to provide funds to establish them on small-holdings or allotments, which resettled 24,000 ex-servicemen in England and Wales by the middle of the 1920s. He argues that this was in part a move by men wanting to soothe the wounds of the mind by immersion in the countryside.¹⁷³ Jeremy Burchardt, on the other hand, emphasises that resettlement was an economic necessity to find employment for those who found it difficult to settle back into civilian life and wanted to live independently and in relative seclusion.¹⁷⁴ An informal and equally important trend away from the urban has been mapped by Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward. They document the draw of quiet living in the makeshift plotland movement, where families set up huts and railway carriages around Britain on common or waste ground as Arcadian escapes.¹⁷⁵ Once again, there are clues to the

¹⁶⁸ Modris Eksteins, 'Literary Memories of World War One', accessed 1 August, 2017, <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/literary-memories-of-world-war-one>; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 423.

¹⁶⁹ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 13.

¹⁷⁰ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6-7.

¹⁷¹ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 144.

¹⁷² Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 323.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 323-6.

¹⁷⁴ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 143. For a more detailed discussion of the take-up of small holdings, see Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003), 88-9.

¹⁷⁵ Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, *Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (London: Mansell, 1984). This activity can be seen in the context of the interwar 'back to the land' enthusiasm: Rose, *Which People's War?*, 197-212; Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 103-72; Pyrs Gruffudd, 'Back to the Land: Historiography, Rurality and the Nation in Interwar Wales', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 19 (1994); Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 261-73.

sonic dimensions of such post-war outdoor activity, which might be further elucidated through specific explorations of listening habits, to the radio for example.

Conclusion

This literature review has shown that the responses to sound in the first half of the twentieth century were various. Some scholars have identified moves seeking to suppress unwanted sound, others to manipulate or manage sound so that it might fulfil the expectations of a modernising industrial Britain. It is clear that the sounds themselves, listening practices and sonic interpretations changed significantly as people gathered to live in busy urban centres and as communications media made new demands on the ear. It is clear too that warfare placed new demands on the senses and the need for auditory knowledge. The sounds associated with the countryside have deep connotations of purity, pre-industrial civilisation, even of a realm devoid of human interference. However, the literature reviewed here tends to concentrate on listening in urban environments or in the countryside, listening in battle or listening in peacetime. My intention in this thesis is to consider both locations together, and a variety of listening scenes, in order to understand the experience of nature in a modernising Britain. In light of the well-documented noise of modern life I will examine what other sounds were found to be interesting and important to listeners. In doing so, I hope to be able to bring a richer appreciation of how listening operated in Britain between 1914 and 1945 and begin to explain the place of nature in the national mind.

Methods and sources

Many of the issues of conducting research with an emphasis on the sonic have been touched upon in the preceding literature review. They will be assessed in more detail here along with an explanation of how and why sources were selected.

This is a qualitative cultural history research project. The methodology is largely document-based, using archives and primary source publications. There is little recorded sonic evidence available for the study of this topic from 1914-45. However, this is not necessarily a disadvantage. Written historical accounts allow an analysis of the response of individual minds to sounds in that period. In fact, because sounds 'have meanings that can only be fully understood within their particular cultural context',¹ the historian in some respects is better off not being able to hear the sounds of the past and risk imposing today's readings upon them. Sounds, Michael Bull reminds us, 'do not speak for themselves', and this study is intended to locate the voices who have spoken about their encounters with the sounds of nature.² The methodological approach I use is distinct from that of soundscape studies, which makes use of field recording, sound mapping and sound walks.³ Sound in these cases is listened to by the researcher rather than being translated into another medium such as a text, which is the chief one I will refer to.

As Mark Smith argues, to study sounds of the past must do more than add texture; it must also revise historical understanding, open up new perspectives. The aim of aural history, he writes, is to develop 'new storylines' about the experience of modernity.⁴ But to study human responses to natural sound is also to study the impressions made by the energies of nature, its inhalations and exhalations, that humans in their environment cannot but be influenced by. This research is not a poetic pursuit, rather a socio-scientific one that seeks to discover more about how the experience of nature's vibrations has influenced human feelings and social dynamics. Ari Kelman usefully explains the broader enterprise of sound studies in this way: 'Scholars of sound are interested in understanding how sound circulates and how it contributes to the ways in which we understand the world around us'.⁵

¹ David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

² Michael Bull, 'Sound Data', in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, ed. Uwe Flick (Sage, forthcoming).

³ Michael Gallagher and Jonathan Prior, 'Sonic Geographies: Exploring Phonograph Methods', *Human Geography* 38 (2014): 272.

⁴ Mark M. Smith, 'Sound – So What?', *The Public Historian* 37 (2015): 133-4.

⁵ 'Rethinking the Soundscape', 215.

Selection of sources

This research did not begin with a well-defined set of sources. In light of the substantial academic literature that addresses the problems of noise in nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture and society, I began by seeking source material that might help to understand how people survived and found ways to thrive in this apparent din, and to find what sounds were sought out or used for relief and recuperation. A survey of practices we might today call music therapy led to a close examination of Florence Nightingale's ideas about the place of quiet in healing regimes in her military wards in the Crimea, discussed in her book *Notes on Nursing* (published four years before the passage of the Street Music Act in 1864). When I found a photograph in the Imperial War Museum of Charing Cross Hospital on Agar Street in London in late 1914, showing a hand-stitched banner reading 'QUIET FOR THE WOUNDED', it confirmed that wartime survival and recovery could be a focus for this work (see Figure 6). An exploration of the history of early BBC broadcasting found that it considered itself to possess certain consoling powers of its own.⁶ As a conveyor of the best of British culture, it seemed to me that British nature might in some way have its place in broadcasting.

Having encountered the fragments of literary nature observation in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, soldiers' writing during and after the conflict was identified as a source of personal emotional testimony that might take me further. The Enham Village Centre archive in Hampshire was discovered following surveys of materials about shell shock care at the Imperial War Museum archives. The story of the well-known 1924 broadcast of a nightingale in song with Beatrice Harrison playing her cello led me to explore more widely John Reith's writing about this event and his vision for broadcasting. And the work of broadcasting historian Seán Street and curator of wildlife sounds at the British Library, Cheryl Tipp, spurred an interest in Ludwig Koch and his recordings of British birds.⁷ His song-books could be found on eBay and soon I was listening to them at home, as he intended them to be.

The kinds of written accounts that I have privileged are those that give access to direct experience through 'earwitnessing', as Schafer calls it – letters, diaries, memoir and autobiographically-oriented books.⁸ Where few personal accounts exist – those of shell-shocked soldiers are a case in point – I have drawn upon institutional records to

⁶ Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 13.

⁷ Street, *The Poetry of Radio*, 100-7; Cheryl Tipp, 'With an Ear to the Earth', *Slightly Foxed* 43 (2014).

⁸ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 8-9.

find the voices of those who have been responsible for men who did not write. My aim has been to surface many voices across the social spectrum in an attempt to give a variety of viewpoints and more than a hint of a 'people's history'.⁹ With this in mind, sources that give access to the everyday opinions of civilian soldiers and radio listeners have been consulted, together with the expert voices of ornithologists, broadcasting and sound recording specialists, and medical authorities. With this wide group of listeners, I hope to be able to answer my primary question of how the sounds, rhythms and quietude of the natural world were listened to, interpreted and used during the pressures of industrial modernity. However, identifying listeners is more straightforward than identifying the sounds of nature that are documented. The sounds of wind, rain and waves have been particularly elusive. Birdsong, in contrast, has been present in surprising abundance in some sources. A sound of British culture that I try to uncover is that of 'peace and quiet'. It is a sound that can comprise many things and is often referred to as 'silence', and yet with attention its many facets *can* be detected in writing.

The following sections will describe in more detail the sources for each of the four core research chapters and how they were selected. The first two chapters use sources concentrated on trench warfare and on recovery from shell shock back in Britain that continues into the 1920s. The last two chapters use sources that concentrate on BBC broadcasting beginning in 1922 and reaching across WWII, together with natural history writing and recordings from the 1930s and 40s.

1. Birdsong over the trenches: the sound of survival and escape

In order to explore how soldiers heard and responded to the sounds of nature I have used a wide array of sources that include letters, diaries, memoirs and, to a lesser extent, poetry, written by middle-class civilian soldiers. I have seen letters as 'field' information, words not intended for publication, and Chapter 1 makes use of letters more than any other source material. Although they were subject to censorship, letters held little back. Their subjective and emotional content gives access to the impressions and feelings of trench life.¹⁰ Three well-known collections of letters were consulted that largely gather material from men who died on the Front.¹¹ These collections have been widely used by other scholars and I have concentrated on known, though edited letters, because they are accessible, easily readable, but crucially are part of the canon

⁹ E. P. Thompson, 'History From Below', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April, 1966, 279-80.

¹⁰ John Laffin, *Letters from the Front, 1914-18* (London: J. M. Dent, 1973), 2-5.

¹¹ A. D. Gillespie, *Letters from Flanders* (London: Smith, Elder, 1916); Lawrence Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930); Laffin, *Letters*.

of WWI letters that has not yet been thoroughly explored for evidence of men's engagement with nature. In this sense the use of these collections minimised the selection bias that might have occurred in targeting specialist sources. I do bias my attention to the lower ranks where possible, as these voices have received less attention.

I have consulted a small set of diaries to complement the soldiers' letters. I was led to Edward Thomas' slim wartime diary because of his reputation as poet and essayist interested in nature, and found his writing at the Front sparse and revealing in other ways.¹² Other well-known diaries written by Arthur Graeme West, Edwin Campion Vaughan and Wilfred Kerr (a Canadian) were selected for their reputation as particularly emotional portraits, having been highlighted by scholars such as Santanu Das as enabling the recovery of the 'sensuous' world of the trenches.¹³ Other sources include Edmund Blunden's memoir *Undertones of War* (1928), which I treat as an officer's psychological account as much as a literary-historical one, and the unusual book *Birds and the War* (1919), which is about all aspects of bird-life observed in the trenches, gleaned from newspapers and journals and compiled by Scottish ornithologist Hugh Gladstone.¹⁴ Several poetry collections have been consulted, Tim Kendall's *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* and Vivien Noakes' *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry*, as well as the primary publication of Colwyn Philipps' poems (1915).¹⁵

2. Pastoral peace and quiet for shell shock and national recovery

First-person accounts of shell shock are scarce, so I have concentrated on the available medico-political and institutional accounts of shell shock care.¹⁶ In addition, reports in the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* have been used to follow medical debates during and immediately after WWI. Central to this chapter are the unexplored archives of the Enham Village Centre in Hampshire.¹⁷ These archives are newly catalogued and were examined on site and elements photographed for further study. Additional materials have been used from the Wellcome Library archive of trench

¹² R. George Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 139-72.

¹³ Arthur Graeme West, *The Diary of a Dead Officer, Being the Posthumous Papers of Arthur Graeme West* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919); Edwin Campion Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory: The Diary of a Young Officer 1917* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010 [1981]); Wilfred Kerr, *Shrieks and Crashes: Being Memories of Canada's Corps, 1917* (Toronto: H. Rose, 1929); Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1928]); Hugh Gladstone, *Birds and the War* (London: Skeffington, 1919).

¹⁵ Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Vivien Noakes, *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Stroud: The History Press, 2006). Colwyn Philipps, *Verses* (London: Smith, Elder, 1915).

¹⁶ For example, the Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock' (London: HMSO, 1922).

¹⁷ Enham Trust, Andover, Hampshire.

journals and the Imperial War Museum's archive of the journal *Reveille* (known earlier as *Recalled to Life*), a quarterly HMSO publication devoted to the recovery of disabled soldiers and sailors. Finally, a wide survey of public debate about shell shock care has been made within the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Times* and the *Guardian*.

3. Broadcasting spiritualised with nature's sounds and silences

The key sources for this chapter are quite compact and primarily constitute contemporary books and journals. First and foremost are the writings of the managing director of the BBC, John Reith, especially his philosophy of broadcasting *Broadcast Over Britain* and his first memoir *Into the Wind*.¹⁸ Second is Arthur Burrows' *The Story of Broadcasting*.¹⁹ Burrows was director of programmes at the BBC in the 1920s. Physicist Oliver Lodge's work is also used, especially his books *Ether and Reality* (1925) and *Talks About Wireless* (1926), the latter based on a series of broadcast talks. Public debates about the new medium of broadcasting and its programming are traced in the wireless magazines *Popular Wireless* and *The Broadcaster*, the popular literary magazine *John O' London's Weekly*, along with the *Radio Times* and the national and regional press available through the British Library's British Newspaper Archive.

4. Modern birdsong and national identity at war

Only for this chapter, which at heart explores Ludwig Koch's birdsong recordings and their broadcast in the 1930s and 40s, have I listened to recorded audio material. His sound-books *Songs of Wild Birds* and *More Songs of Wild Birds* and the fragments of his radio programmes that have been preserved online and on vinyl LPs have been studied.²⁰ Listening to this material has provided a sense of the atmosphere and personality that was communicated on air, but it is the thoughts and feelings of Koch himself, the BBC and the listening public that has been the focus of my attention. Films and propaganda reels have also been examined, notably *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Things to Come* (1936), *London Can Take It!* (1940), *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *The Demi-Paradise* (1943). However, contemporaneous texts have still made up the central primary sources consulted for this chapter. Koch's papers (family correspondence, scrapbooks, press clippings) held by the British Library, his sound-books and memoirs, and material held at the BBC Written Archive in

¹⁸ John Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924); John Reith, *Into the Wind* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949).

¹⁹ Arthur Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting* (London: Cassell, 1924).

²⁰ E. M. Nicholson and Ludwig Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds* (London: Witherby, 1951 [1936]); Nicholson and Koch, *More Songs of Wild Birds* (London: Witherby, 1937); John Burton and Desmond Hawkins, *A Salute to Ludwig Koch* (London: BBC Records, 1969), LP; Seán Street, *Ludwig Koch and the Music of Nature*, BBC Radio 4, 15 April, 2009, accessed 1 August, 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/archive_pioneers/6505.shtml.

Caversham (scripts, contributor file, personnel file, as well as programme files for *Children's Hour* and *Country Magazine*). The writing and broadcasts of Julian Huxley, the books of Max Nicholson and J.B. Priestley's *Postscripts* broadcasts have all been referred to. Finally, the letters and feature pages of the *Radio Times* and *The Listener* were consulted.

1. Birdsong over the trenches: the sound of survival and escape

Apart from the gift of luck, physical and emotional survival on the Western Front has often been attributed to a combination of individual fortitude, soldierly companionship and communication with loved ones at home. In this chapter, I argue that amidst the monstrous sounds of artillery shelling, officers and their ranks heard the surprising notes of birdsong. It helped them survive. Birds and their songs were the pre-eminent experience and metaphor of hope in the trenches because they could spur the imagination away from the troubled human world.¹ This chapter is about the ways in which soldiers thought about the sounds of nature that surrounded them in strange abundance. The realities, fantasies and rituals associated with the sounds of nature will be delineated and analysed, inspired as I am by Eric Leed's work on these categories.² The trenches of the Western Front are the focus for this investigation because of their pastoral setting in which men were immersed, while the landscape was gradually remodelled by artillery. In this submerged world, the earth and the sky took on special significance, and listening modes became highly developed as a method of avoiding the dangers of weaponry overhead.

Paul Fussell touched on some of these aspects of existence on the Western Front in his still relevant *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a study of the literary imagination. The chapter 'Arcadian Recourses', which has received little scholarly attention, suggested that a 'recourse to the pastoral' was an English mode of both 'fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them'.³ However, Fussell's devotion to the symbolic value of pastoral themes in soldiers' writing overtakes the contribution of lived experience of warfare in the mind of the combatant. No doubt, there is an important and perhaps indissoluble link between the remembered motifs of nature and emotional response. Yet the need to stay on high alert at all times meant frontline soldiers existed in the present moment.⁴ It is the immediate and present-tense responses related to survival I seek to explore here. John Lewis-Stempel has concentrated on how the lived experience

¹ John Lewis-Stempel's recent account of animals and plants in the lives of soldiers, *Where the Poppies Blow*, argues that this relationship was key to endurance at the Front.

² Leed, *No Man's Land*, 115-6, 128-9, 134.

³ Fussell, *The Great War*, 235.

⁴ Volmar, *Soundscape of World War I*, 231.

of nature in the trenches sustained soldiers, but only briefly looks at the resilience and beauty of birds before moving on to horses, pets, gardening and hunting.⁵

In order to explore how soldiers heard and responded to the sounds of nature I have used a wide array of sources. In 1975 Fussell's book was criticised for concentrating too much on accounts from officers rather than infantrymen, yet these make up the majority of the accounts available to historians.⁶ Newly published memoirs continue to offer middle-class perspectives.⁷ My source selection gives attention to letters⁸ and diaries⁹ in preference to poetry, but they remain the words of men who wrote down their thoughts. Letters' subjective and emotional content allow broad questions of trench life to be addressed that include: What did the war of the trenches feel like? How did men endure the experience? My source selection balances accounts from a *survivor's* perspective with those from men who never had a chance to reflect on their war experience. The experiences of British soldiers are not compared to those of other nations, though German accounts are occasionally brought in to test how unique the tendency to pastoral delight is among the British. I have drawn my evidence from sources that other scholars have used, but I look at them afresh, sensitive to their engagement with nature, and bias my attention to the lower ranks where possible.

These sources will allow two important questions to be addressed. In what ways was nature heard and listened to in the chaos of the trenches, in light of the importance of listening to survival? What was heard, and what were the realities and fantasies of meaning associated with these sounds and rhythms? First, I will consider the modes of trench listening for survival and the presence of birdsong within this sound world. Then, there will be an analysis of three relationships that soldiers establish with nature's sounds; one is a relationship based on the re-ordering of rhythms of regeneration, another about perceptions of patriotic resilience, and finally there is the matter of imaginative flight and a return home. The revised meanings of the sounds of nature and the noises of industrial modernity that emerge from the Western Front

⁵ Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*.

⁶ Samuel Hynes reminds us that nearly all of the millions who fought, died silently or survived, 'but in either case left no record, because they were too poor, inarticulate, unlettered or shy; or because it simply did not occur to them to write down what had happened to them', *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 32. John Laffin argues that 'the rank and file of the Great War, especially in the British and French armies, were ill-educated and often only functionally literate', *Letters from the Front*, 3. Fiona Reid has found that despite the huge volumes of personal writings from the war, there are very few accounts from ordinary shell-shocked soldiers: *Broken Men*, 5.

⁷ See for example, Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts, eds., *Wings over the Western Front: The First World War Diaries of Collingwood Ingram* (Charlbury: Day Books, 2014).

⁸ Gillespie, *Letters from Flanders*. Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*. Laffin, *Letters from the Front*.

⁹ Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas; West, Diary of a Dead Officer*; Kerr, *Shrieks and Crashes*; Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory*.

experience, together with the cultivation of listening practices that return with soldiers as they transition to civilian life, are explored in other chapters of the thesis.

‘The air is loud with death’:¹⁰ listening in fear for danger

The sound of shelling was the defining sensory provocation of the industrialised warfare conducted across the trenches of the Western Front. Much writing about trench life is preoccupied with the gruelling persistence and noise of bombardment. The intensity of the guns created a steady state of stress and vigilance while shells fell or in anticipation of the next barrage. Such sensory assaults had inevitable psychological consequences, the phenomenon called shell shock being closely associated with prolonged exposure to artillery fire. Bayonets, rifle fire, grenade and mortar attacks, and the machine gun made famous in the first days of the Somme, were all part of the weaponry of this war. Yet the medieval technology of cannonry, made more sophisticated and powerful than in any previous conflict, was the force that created more fear, carnage and death than any other mode of killing.¹¹

The intensity of artillery action could become close to unbearable. Lieutenant Robert Pickering struggled to cope, and knew that for his infantry embedded in the trenches it was worse still:

The shell fire never ceases and at intervals regular bombardments take place for hours on end – to put the wind up the other party. This morning early we were in an absolute inferno for a long time and we get that kind of thing about every other day. You get perhaps 5-700 guns going on both sides together, and the number of shells of all calibres that come over are numbered in tens of thousands. It’s remarkable how one can live through such an inferno. It nearly drives you mad. Conditions are getting worse and worse for the poor infantry who man the trenches – it is simply an artillery duel[.]¹²

Under such pressure of attack from the sky, officers and their ranks were left feeling defenceless and exposed. Loud noise itself created acute primal fear, but the results of shelling on the fragile body were equally terrifying. Captain Ivar Campbell, in a letter home in the winter of 1915, told of his bewilderment at the vast quantities of explosives sent in all directions: ‘Such infernally large explosive shells to kill such infernally small and feeble animals’.¹³ Most of all, artillery was hated and feared for its

¹⁰ Isaac Rosenberg, ‘Dead Man’s Dump’, in Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.

¹¹ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32-3; John Terraine, *White Heat: The New Warfare 1914-18* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1982), 95.

¹² Robert Pickering, letter to his brother, 1 September, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 214.

¹³ Ivar Campbell, letter, winter 1915, in Laffin, *Letters*, 10.

effect on the body. 'It is all very well to talk of a clean death in battle, but it's not a clean death that the artillery deals. It means arms and legs torn off and men mangled out of recognition by their great hulking bullies of guns', wrote Lieutenant Arthur Heath.¹⁴ Soldiers crouched, sick with fear, 'not of being hit, but of seeing other people torn, in the way the high-explosive tears.'¹⁵ H. H. Munro, the short story writer and satirist, wrote to his sister Ethel regularly when he was serving at the Front. On Christmas day 1915 he included this adaptation of a carol with a bitter and ironic sketch to explain how the lambs were being blown to pieces in this once pastoral landscape of the Front:

While Shepherds watched their flocks by night
All seated on the ground
A high-explosive shell came down
And mutton rained around[.]¹⁶

So often, the sound of artillery bombardment was described as a 'continuous roar'.¹⁷ Ernest Nottingham wrote of 'hour on hour's ceaseless rolling reverberation!'¹⁸ Such descriptions reveal the feeling that the oppression of the guns was ever-present, even though there were pauses and much waiting and boredom in the trenches. These feelings of ceaseless continuity of sound came from the perception of solidity in the noise. The statistics of heavy artillery activity say much about the weight of metal sent through the air. The fourteen-inch gun of the British could fire a shell weighing 1,400 pounds over many miles, while the 42 cm heavy howitzer of the Germans, nick-named 'Dicke Bertha', could fire shells weighing over 2,000 pounds at the rate of ten per hour. In the eight days from 24 June 1916 of the Somme encounter, 1,732,873 shells were fired by the British. Prior to the Messines assault, from May to June 1917, British artillery fired more than three and a half million shells in support of the attack, at least three shells per second for a 12-day period.¹⁹ A 'storm of steel' indeed, as Ernst Jünger described it in his 1920 account.²⁰

The shock waves from explosions would physically attack the ear and invade the body. Ford Madox Ford narrates the opening page of *No More Parades* with these words: 'The drums of the ears were pressed inwards, solid noise showered about the universe, enormous echoes pushed these men to the right, to the left, or down towards the

¹⁴ Arthur Heath, letter, 6 July, 1915, in *ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ Theodore Wilson, letter to his mother, 1 March, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 295.

¹⁶ H. H. Munro, *The Square Egg and Other Sketches* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1924), 119.

¹⁷ William Dyson, letter to his brother, 5 July, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 104; Edward Thomas, diary, 7 April, 1917, in Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 171. Robert Graves recalled this impression five decades on, in an interview with Leslie Smith: 'Noise never stopped for one moment – ever': 'The Great Years of Their Lives', *The Listener*, 15 July, 1971, 74.

¹⁸ Ernest Nottingham, letter to a friend, in Housman, *War Letters*, 199.

¹⁹ Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The World War One Source Book* (London: Arms & Amour Press, 1994), 82-90.

²⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (London: Penguin, 2004 [1920]).

table'. Men were squashed by the acoustic pressure of the guns. Ford continues by saying that even sheltering in a dug-out could not protect men from the noise that 'said things of an intolerable intimacy'. Ford's fiction is deeply rooted in his own frontline experience.²¹ A more prosaic indication of the sound pulses tearing across the battlefield comes from William Dyson who told his brother after having had trouble shaving that 'the big guns seemed to blow one's beard about'.²² However, to be close to an exploding shell had its own sonic physicality that was immediate and traumatic. The 'concussion finally made one sick and dizzy', Colwyn Philipps wrote in his diary.²³ New recruits who had not got used to the noise would be sent 'green and throwing up'.²⁴ The physicality was not just oppressive and bewildering; the kinetic energy from a nearby high-explosive detonation could knock soldiers off their feet, stun men into unconsciousness, even stop the heart.

In spite of the apparent wall of sound, the Front was in fact a place of intense and careful listening, in which the differentiation of overhead sounds became vital to survival. With vision limited from a trench position, further obscured by smoke, wire and mounds of earth, 'hearing became much more important than vision as an index of what was real and threatening'.²⁵ Eric Leed was one of the first scholars to develop the idea of what Yaron Jean has more recently called 'sonic mindedness' in soldiers fighting on the Western Front, a method of distinguishing between safety and danger.²⁶ This kind of listening was a military protocol as well as an instinctive individual response. But it took time to learn.

In what he called his 'trench education', 19-year-old Edmund Blunden learned in the first month or so at the Front how to distinguish between sounds that were life-threatening and those that were merely annoying.²⁷ He found there to be 'a hypocritical tunelessness about a gas shelling in flight and in explosion'.²⁸ One warm and relatively quiet afternoon in 1915 he tells: 'I called for the company barber and sat

²¹ Ford Madox Ford was a particularly careful listener. In two letters to Joseph Conrad in 1916 he described not just the deafening sounds he had witnessed, but how the sound of artillery fire depended on the terrain. He differentiated between wooded country, marshland, downland or clay, as well as the effect of weather. See Tom Vandevelde, "Are you Going to Mind the Noise?": Mapping the Soundscape of Parade's End', in *Ford Madox Ford's Parade's End: The First World War, Culture, and Modernity*, ed. A. Chantler and R. Hawkes (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 58. See also Sara Haslam, ed., *Ford Madox Ford: Parade's End Volume III: A Man Could Stand Up* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011), xxii-iv.

²² William Dyson, letter to his brother, 5 July, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 103.

²³ Colwyn Philipps, diary, 22 November, 1914, in Colwyn Philipps, *Verses* (London: Smith, Elder, 1915), 98.

²⁴ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (London: Vintage, 1996 [1929]), 76.

²⁵ Leed, *No Man's Land*, 19-20, 124.

²⁶ Jean, 'The Sonic Mindedness of the Great War', 53. According to Jean, airmen and sailors had their own listening experiences and techniques, which were quite distinct from ground soldiers, 55-60. Hendy has developed the idea of sonic mindedness by looking at Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (Hendy, *Noise*, 272-5). See also Volmar, 'The Soundscape of World War I', 227-36; Elizabeth Bruton and Graeme Gooday, 'Listening in Combat – Surveillance Technologies beyond the Visual in the First World War', *History and Technology* 32 (2016).

²⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London: Penguin, 2000), 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

meekly under his respectful hand, noting the distance of any disturbances.²⁹ Sometimes the rhythm of machine guns from the German side or his own would trace out humour, such as “‘‘Ri-tiddley-i-ti... Pom POM’’, done in bullets’. From his luminous memoir, *Undertones of War* (1928), it is plain that Blunden was listening constantly for danger and for safety. The Canadian Wilfred Kerr gave his version of the importance of understanding the sound world of airborne ordnance in his memoir *Shrieks and Crashes* (1929): ‘One was able to judge where a shell would fall by the pitch of its shriek. A noise like a train overhead meant a destination miles in the rear; a sharp shriek or a deep growl meant imminent danger; and between the two there lay a wide variety of pitches, which one soon learned to interpret properly’.³⁰

But even seasoned soldiers experienced sounds they had never heard before as technology developed throughout the conflict.³¹ And horrible surprises could appear with no warning. In the Cambrin sector of trenches, Blunden witnessed pure horror as a shell dropped unannounced and turned a young and cheerful lance-corporal making tea to ‘goblets of blackening flesh’.³² Sometimes men were simply too exhausted to pay sufficient attention to the myriad sounds around them. In Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce et Decorum est* the trudging troops are ‘drunk with fatigue’, ‘deaf even to the hoots / Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.’ The words that follow on bring a different sound, one of men crying out to each other: ‘Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!’.³³ Sometimes, knowledge of the components of the soundscape could be useless as sounds lost their definition in the onslaught. ‘In a bombardment all tones mingle’, Ivar Campbell wrote in a letter from France during the winter of 1915.³⁴ And for all the knowledge about the kind of projectile approaching, if it was judged to be a heavy shell heading in your direction, sometimes there was little that could be done to protect oneself. It was a matter of ‘waiting and wondering’, wrote Canadian Lieutenant J. S. Williams, a bank clerk:

But the real “corkers” are those “Jack Johnsons”, or “Coal Boxes”. You hear the brute coming a long way off with the noise of an express train. It’s no good hiding anywhere, because you would only be buried by the debris, so you sit tight, hold your breath and pray to God it won’t hit you.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰ Kerr, *Shrieks and Crashes*, 131.

³¹ Mary Habeck, ‘Technology in the War’, in *The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker and Mary Habeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 104, note 15.

³² *Undertones of War*, 46.

³³ Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce et Decorum est’, in Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War*, 155.

³⁴ Ivar Campbell, letter, winter 1915, in Laffin, *Letters*, 9.

³⁵ J. S. Williams, letter, 3 October, 1915, in *ibid.*, 58.

Often, then, the sonic chaos of the trenches would have little determinate identity, and however sonic minded a soldier had become, evasive action was limited.³⁶ As a result, the trenches were an environment of constant alertness and agitation. It was an environment where ears were always cocked, even if one could not always save oneself. Blunden described as ‘mental torture’ the concentration of listening to projectiles in flight and detonation over and over again in Bodmin Copse.³⁷ In this psychic state, men might hear all sorts of things that may or may not have been there. Listening continued into the night, when fear and anxiety were again in attendance. From the position of a listening post poking out into no-man’s land, all sounds could conjure dread in the tension and stillness: the ‘rustling of grasses’, the ‘tap-tapping of distant workers’, ‘the wail of the exploded bomb and the animal cries of wounded men’ were all threatening.³⁸ Soldier-poet Frederick Harvey told of the tension tearing at the nerves during listening-post duty:

For four dead hours
 Afraid to move or whisper, cough or sneeze,
 Waiting in wonder whether ‘twas the breeze
 Moved in the grass, shaking the frozen flowers
 Just then.³⁹

Sometimes what sounded like the creeping of an enemy soldier turned out to be a host of rats feeding on the corpses of the unburied.⁴⁰

Some listening activity was more systematic. Artillery units on both sides of the line used mathematical sound-ranging techniques to locate enemy batteries. Complex arrays of microphones were used to distinguish between the sound made by the firing of the gun and the sonic boom of the shell.⁴¹ For all that, the ear might simply be pressed to the ground in a much more intimate connection of the body with the earth, in an attempt to quickly work out the distance of an enemy gun position (Figure 1).

³⁶ My research does not concur with Bruton and Gooday, who argue that ‘When the characteristic signature wail of most airborne ordnance was first heard, evasive action could be taken to leap out of the way of more deadly missiles’: ‘Listening in Combat’, 218.

³⁷ *Undertones of War*, 171.

³⁸ Charles Sorley, letter, 26 August, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 250.

³⁹ Frederick Harvey, ‘A True Tale of the Listening Post’, in Vivien Noakes, *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Stroud: The History Press, 2006), 90-1.

⁴⁰ Robert Pickering, letter to his brother, 1 September, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 214.

⁴¹ William Van der Kloot, ‘Lawrence Bragg’s Role in the Development of Sound-Ranging in World War I’, *Notes and Records of The Royal Society* 59 (2005). By the end of 1916, enemy artillery could be located accurately to within 25 to 50 meters. German forces were also acquiring the skills to distinguish between the size and trajectory of shells. Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 87.



Figure 1. 'The Battle of Passchendaele'. A distant shell-burst on Pilckem Ridge, with a soldier trying to establish the distance of the shelling positions by listening to the ground (IWM).

Underground, particularly from 1916, tunnellers were listening out to determine how close they were to the enemy and their tunnelling works. Miners were enlisted from the colliery towns of Britain to create tunnel systems that could be charged with explosives and detonated under German-held territory, as well as to disable German tunnelling operations. Using special microphone devices connected to a stethoscope, sappers could determine the distance and direction of the picking and shovelling sounds of German mining activity, or even the enemy walking or talking.⁴² Sometimes listening simply used the naked ear. The bellows air-feed would be turned off and all work would stop. Lieutenant Geoffrey Cassels of the 175 Tunnelling Company, listening alone, describes these lonely moments underground:

Forehead pressed to the face, side to the floor of the gallery, one stood, knelt or lay – listening, listening, listening. Some sounds would be heard, dull and muffled. There was always that fraction of a second of doubt – when it *might* be the enemy mining. One's pulse rate would quicken and fright push to the fore in one's whole being[.]⁴³

⁴² H. Standish Ball, 'The Work of the Miner on the Western Front, 1915-18', *Transactions of the Institution of Mining and Metallurgy* 28 (1919).

⁴³ Alexander Barrie, *War Underground* (London: Star, 1981), 72. For an account of German underground listening see Encke, "War Noises on the Battlefield."

For all this listening, the noise and weight of shelling, and the destruction of companions and the landscape, created an intensely fearful psychological condition, that no amount of knowledge of ballistic sounds could fully relieve. But relief was needed and sought out. Amid the bombing there could be respite.

Sonic relief amid the shelling

So much strained listening throughout the day and the night had the effect of pulling into the orbit of perception the necessary sounds of relief and counterpoint. In addition, the pummelling of artillery, with its heavy physicality, stimulated a search for lightness, for the freedom of the air. The cacophonous and unpredictable soundscape of battle created a need for sounds that felt harmonious, ordered, familiar, and most of all peaceable and non-violent, I will go on to show. Men may have become used to the strain of the battle scene to some extent but they had to remain porous and sensitive to external stimuli. Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon wrote that trench existence was ‘saturated by the external senses; and although our actions were domineered by military discipline, our animal instincts were always uppermost’.⁴⁴ One sound in particular appealed to men’s animal instincts and became a crucial counter to the battlefield soundtrack: the song of birds.

It was a surprise to men in the trenches to find that birds were commonplace. They could co-exist with the shells and the destruction. Captain Medicott personally saw and recorded 106 species in Pas-de-Calais in the period of March to August 1917 between no-man’s land and the reserve trenches.⁴⁵ Because of the constrictions of the trench system and because of avian behaviour, birds were often heard more than seen. In fact, the two birds that received the most attention from soldiers were the most invisible. The skylark would trill far above the earth, lost in the sky, and the nightingale’s shyness in undergrowth, and tendency to give evening performances, guaranteed its elusiveness. While some soldiers’ writing gives the sense that the shelling never stopped, others make it clear that tedium was frequent. This was a time when birds could be noticed and appreciated. Soldiers were amazed and enchanted by their presence. ‘If it weren’t for the birds’, a Scottish miner turned soldier told his local newspaper, ‘what a hell it would be’.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Quoted in Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 13. When Sassoon looked at his diary he realised it contained ‘lists of birds and flowers, snatches of emotion and experience’.

⁴⁵ W. S. Medicott, ‘Bird Notes from the Western Front (Pas-de-Calais)’, *British Birds* 12 (1919). The birds noted as common were as follows: yellowhammer, wood pigeon, corncrake, partridge and quail, chaffinch, whitethroat, crested lark, skylark, green finch, linnet, starling, tree and house sparrow, magpie, hooded crow, kestrel.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 33.

While we have far fewer accounts from men in the ranks than educated officers, it is just as likely for the former to have been interested and enlivened by seeing and hearing birds on the Front. After all, many of the officer-class were urbanites, whereas their men were much more likely to come from rural and farming families with close affinities for the countryside and its rewards, as well as its trials. The song of the lark over meadowland was in the blood of country-dwellers.



Figure 2. Percy Smith's, 'Solitude', from *Sixteen Drypoints and Etchings. A Record of the Great War*, 1930, plate 3.

The unlikeliness of the survival of birds in trench conditions provoked soldiers to place bets on their fortune.⁴⁷ In light of the increasing intensity of artillery action as the war progressed, it became a wonder that there were any signs of the natural world at all. Much writing from the Front emphasised the obliteration of the landscape, as

⁴⁷ Emma Turner, *Every Garden a Bird Sanctuary* (London: Witherby, 1935), 14.

did Paul Nash's paintings *Wire* and *We are Making a New World*, depicting the headless trees and churned earth of the trench-world. In these images, made in 1918 before he became an Official War Artist, there is a stillness, an absolute absence of life.⁴⁸ A similar wasteland was visualised years earlier by the gunner Percy Smith, a printmaker and artist before the war. He made a dry point of his view at Thiepval, near the Somme, in 1916 (Figure 2). The bleakness of the scene is shocking. In using drypoint there is no colour. The lone tree looks like a corpse pointing to heaven. It may be the last tree in the world. What is left provides no branches on which birds may perch or nest or sing from.

Yet there was life in nature still. Theodore Wilson wrote to his aunt in April 1916: 'I'm writing in a trench not very far from the Germans and I've just heard the first cuckoo!'⁵⁰ This report from France followed the tradition in *The Times* of publishing claims from those who believed they were the first of the year to hear the herald of spring. It came in the same letter that Wilson announced that the gruelling silence of death was everywhere – 'you have to walk through it, and under it and past it' – and so in contrast the cuckoo's simple two-note descending phrase must have sounded all the more vital. The contrast between ever-present death and the vibrancy of birdsong is evident in a poem which William Noel Hodgson formed in his head as he marched back to his rest billets with his battalion after fierce night-time fighting at Loos. The chatter of sparrows is placed in opposition to the noise and threat of shelling:

The foolish noise of sparrows
And starlings in a wood –
After the grime of battle
We know that these are good.

Death whining down from Heaven,
Death roaring from the ground,
Death stinking in the nostril,
Death shrill in every sound[.]⁵¹

After months of fighting in the Somme, with his battalion depleted by three-quarters of its original strength, Edmund Blunden had 'two views of the universe: the glue-ridden formless mortifying wilderness of the crater zone above, and below, fusty, clay-smearred, candle-lit wooden galleries, where the dead lay decomposing under knocked-in entrances'.⁵² In such grim circumstances, perhaps it is no surprise to find

⁴⁸ See David Boyd Haycock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 30-3.

⁵⁰ Theodore Wilson, letter to his aunt, 27 April, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 296.

⁵¹ William Hodgson, 'Back to Rest', quoted in Charlotte Zeepvat, *Before Action: William Noel Hodgson and the 9th Devons: A Story of the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2015), 130.

⁵² Edmund Blunden, *Overtures of War: Poems of the First World War*, ed., Martin Taylor (London: Duckworth, 1996), 227.

accounts of the thrill of a bird in song, not just after a bombardment but during it. Ford Madox Ford, in a letter to his friend Lucy Masterman, spelt out the surprise when he declared ‘the noise of the bombardment is continuous – so continuous that one gets used to it’, and yet ‘the ear picks out the singing of the innumerable larks’.⁵³ In a state of acute listening, while seeking some kind of relief, Ford found his senses could extract from the din the cascades of a much smaller but equally urgent sound.

For all the horror of the trenches, the universe was still able to sustain and encourage bird life, and soldiers grasped the signals ringing out into the battle zone. There was much simple pleasure to be had hearing larks singing through the noise of shelling; ‘it is very cheering to see them’, Second Lieutenant Otto Murray-Dixon reported.⁵⁴ Denis Barnett, a subaltern in the Leinsters, wrote to his mother from the trenches in 1915: ‘it is lovely sitting in the sun, listening to the cock-chaffinches and yellow-hammers tuning up’.⁵⁵ For one soldier, the diversion of finding where a golden oriole was singing, even with rifle bullets cracking into the trees above, could refresh the mind. ‘For a time’, he said, ‘the war is forgotten’.⁵⁶ Not for long, though, could the pressures of fighting be forgotten. Instead, a routine of listening was cultivated which accommodated both the sounds of artillery and the sounds of birds.

One might say that these were the two keynote sounds of the trenches. The term ‘keynote’ is R. Murray Schafer’s, and he defines these as sounds that give meaning to all other sounds. The keynote is ubiquitous and regular though not always consciously heard, and it has a ‘pervasive influence on our behaviour and moods’.⁵⁷ These two archetypal sounds of the trenches, birds and bombs, existed in psychic tension, one good, one bad, but that contrast also established a rhythm to the trench experience. An exploration of one artillery officer’s diary will introduce this idea of rhythmicity, showing how these dual sonic characters co-existed in one man’s short life at the Front.

Poet and writer Edward Thomas wrote a war diary from 1 January to 8 April 1917.⁵⁸ In it, Thomas continued his life-long habit of observing and recording his response to the natural world. However, unlike his poetry, his diary observations are recorded in sparse, flat notes that seem to reflect his soldierly duties as an officer with the Royal Artillery. There is some irony that Thomas enrolled to be an artilleryman. He was a

⁵³ Quoted in Vandeveld, “‘Are you Going to Mind the Noise?’”, 59.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 49.

⁵⁵ Denis Barnett, letter to his mother, 29 March, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 39.

⁵⁶ Correspondent for *Country Life*, quoted in Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 46.

⁵⁷ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 9.

⁵⁸ Thomas wrote no poetry from the trenches. .

writer who published in 1909 *The South Country* and then in 1913 *In Pursuit of Spring*, both heartfelt accounts of his wanderings and cycling through his precious English countryside. He is the poet who is well-known to have told his friend when asked what he was fighting for to have stopped, picked up a pinch of earth and said ‘literally, for this’, as he crumbled it between finger and thumb.⁵⁹ None of that sentiment is present in his first diary entry from his training station in Lydd in Kent. Rather, it is all very matter-of-fact: ‘Shooting with 15 pounders and then 6” howitzers’ is his first sentence. Thomas appears quite happy and does not mention the noise in these early days at home.⁶⁰

In France, Thomas’ diary entry from 14 March 1917 says more about the sounds around him: ‘A still evening – blackbirds singing far off – a spatter of our machine guns – the spit of one enemy bullet – a little rain – no winds – only far-off artillery’. These are notes exclusively about the sound of guns and nature, together with weather conditions that would concern an artillery officer as well as someone steeped in sensing one’s environment. The seemingly natural co-existence of the sounds of mechanical fire and birdsong is again present on 25 March when Thomas writes ‘the O.P. [Observation Post] 20 yards away had a shell on to it, and we had several over our shoulders. Larks singing. Drawing panoramas’. Birdsong also marks out and occupies the quiet when the guns pause. On 28 March, it is ‘Frosty and clear and some blackbirds singing at Agny Chateau in the quiet of the exhausted battery’.⁶¹ He gives little away about how it feels to him to hear birds singing out. There is some pleasure, though his recordings of sound reflect too the monotony of the days, slowly plodding on. Thomas writes short entries every single day in France and almost every one records a sound of warfare or a sound of a bird, or both. His consistent daily writing is a reassuring rhythm in itself.

Thomas sometimes enjoyed conjoining the sounds of weaponry with nature’s monsters: ‘Machine gun bullets snaking along – hissing like little wormy serpents.’⁶² On other occasions the descriptions of weaponry take on those of gentle nature, as Thomas becomes accustomed and comfortable with his daily soundscape. For example, he records on 5 March the ‘singing of Field shells and snuffling of 6”’.⁶³ Perhaps in this use of language we can see evidence of how he sought to nullify the

⁵⁹ Thomas quoted in Judy Kendall, *Edward Thomas, Birdsong and Flight* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2014), 55. Kendall has noted the rhythms of birds and gunfire in Thomas’ diary-keeping (8).

⁶⁰ Diary, 1 January, 1917, in Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 143.

⁶¹ March entries, in *ibid.*, 160-9.

⁶² 31 March, 1917, in *ibid.*, 169.

⁶³ 5 March, 1917, in *ibid.*, 160-1. On 21 March, he writes: ‘Now I hardly felt as if a shell could hurt’ (166).

threat of the shells by wrapping them in sweet, soft sonic metaphors.⁶⁴ His experience more generally is woven through with observations of weather, moles digging, sycamore leaves dancing. Thomas would also compare the procession of German shells overhead with the sight of familiar birds returning to roost in the evening: 'But Hun shelled chiefly over our heads into Beaurains all night – like starlings returning 20 or 30 a minute'.⁶⁵ Thomas hated the sounds and vibrations of enemy shelling and needed to find ways to live with it. He wrote of 'a horrible night of bombardment' with little sleep⁶⁶ and the 'air flapping all night as with great sails in strong gusty wind'.⁶⁷

Thomas' diary illustrates that hearing the shells he sent over to the enemy and the ones they sent back, together with the sounds of birds, became a defining daily routine that gave shape and meaning to existence. His recording of the beginning of his day on 4 April in three simple steps – waking, hearing birdsong, shooting – brought with it a normalised ritual that could continue indefinitely: 'Up at 4.30. Blackbirds sing at battery at 5.45 – shooting at 6.30'.⁶⁸ These recordings spelt out the components of his surrounding soundscape but also gave a sense of sequence and order to events. On the morning of 9 April, while directing artillery fire, Thomas was killed by the blast from a 5.9-inch shell.⁶⁹ The routine was permanently interrupted after just 10 weeks in France, when the explosive shock wave stopped his heart. His body remained unmarked. A week before, he had written of the night-time shelling: 'I did not doubt that my heart thumped so that if they had come closer together it might have stopped'.⁷⁰ The physicality of sound seems to have killed Thomas, and it has been suggested that the sound waves left their impression on the small diary bound in pigskin that he carried with him – the cover and pages of the diary were left curiously creased with ripple patterns.⁷¹

Soldiers had never before been exposed to the strange and savage sounds of this industrialised warfare. These were for the large part civilian soldiers, who also managed to hear birds amid the noise and fear, singing songs that were familiar from home. The acute listening practices, which centred on flying weaponry, ensured too

⁶⁴ Has the monstrousness of the sound been pastoralised? There is evidence elsewhere for this possibility. See Habeck, 'Technology in the War', 110–11. However, the ferocity of weaponry sounds are also described in terms of an angry nature: Lance-Corporal George Sedding wrote that the 'earth vibrates with the gusty thunder' during an assault (in Housman, *War Letters*, 232); of bullets in the falling night: 'These ricochet off with varied noises – some with a high ringing note, others with the deep and savage hum of an angry hornet' (ibid., 233). Blunden hears bullets as aggressive insects too; he writes of 'furious insect-like zips' and 'whizzing like gnats' (*Undertones of War*, 10, 19).

⁶⁵ 20 March, 1917, in Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 165.

⁶⁶ 16 March, 1917, in ibid., 164.

⁶⁷ 5 April, 1917, in ibid., 170.

⁶⁸ 4 April, 1917, in ibid., 170.

⁶⁹ Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 139.

⁷⁰ 27 March, 1917, in ibid., 168.

⁷¹ Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 139.

that the sounds of birds were messages of the joy of unbounded life. To make much of birdsong could be a kind of ritual that celebrated harmony and musicality when such things seemed impossible.

This chapter will go on now to explore the experience of sensing nature's sounds and rhythms in conditions that make that possibility extraordinary. I concentrate on three relationships with the sounds of nature, each of which contributed in their own ways to emotional survival. First was the appeal of nature's rhythms that demonstrated seasonal renewal and regeneration. Second was the inspiration that the song of birds and their springtime habits could bring. Birds appeared to sing on, indifferent to the war. They seemed to defy death. And third was the imagined skyward escape from the mud and blood, triggered by the song and flight of the lark.

Regenerative rhythms

One of the primary crises of trench reality was the challenge of chaos and disorder. This was manifest especially in the unpredictable sound world of weaponry, in which every moment was subject to disruption, shock and injury. The crisis was also manifest in the potential termination of time for every soldier who saw all around him the cessation of life's continuity. In these fracturings of experience can be seen behaviours that aim to imagine a reordering of a corrupted soundscape (where birdsong can be seen to return it to a state of purity)⁷² and an active participation in the regenerative rhythms that nature displayed. In these behaviours, trench soldiers were able to ascribe meaning and pattern to their damaged world, even when that world seemed to resist all patterning, by mobilising all the cultural resources of meaning available to them.⁷³ All normal daily routines were undermined in the trenches. Periods of frantic activity were followed by longer periods of boredom, waiting and anxious anticipation. Circadian rhythms were disrupted or reversed as sleep was taken whenever possible, day or night, resulting in disorientation, exhaustion and depression of morale.⁷⁴ In what was certainly an understatement, Richard Donaldson told his mother in a letter in November 1917: 'This is a restless life of ours out here'.⁷⁵

⁷² See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

⁷³ Leed, *No Man's Land*, x.

⁷⁴ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 27-34; Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 261.

⁷⁵ Richard Donaldson, letter to his mother, 14 November, 1917, in Housman, *War Letters*, 85.

The imbalance of extremes: noise and silence

Whether shelling was intermittent and unpredictable or the often-mentioned 'continuous noise' of intense bombardment, all men longed for some kind of sonic respite provided by the gift of quiet or silence. 'One lives a life of continuous strain and reaction, strain and reaction, and it's difficult to write or think quite quietly', wrote Theodore Wilson, serving with the Sherwood Foresters.⁷⁶ This was a war in which men were entrenched in the land and immersed in a perverse rurality. During the mauling and pounding of the countryside by shell-fire, men found themselves searching for the natural state that countryside should be. However, the trench environment hardly allowed for the harmonies of rural sound. Instead men were caught between fearsome noise and its equally irksome absence. A new day brought hope as the sky glowed once again with 'gold and orange and purple fading into an ultra violet' over a swamp of mud, wrote Richard Donaldson, but something was wrong about that scene. 'Only there was no life about it, no men, no birds, no creeping things; and the stillness was painful because the guns were suddenly silent'.⁷⁷

When men wrote of silence, it was rarely dead silence that they heard. The pop of a bullet or the call of a bird as a routine punctuation mark usually appeared within the writing. When silence itself was mentioned, death was usually close by. Captain Ivar Campbell demonstrates the unnerving arrhythmias in trench sound, in a description from France on a misty summer morning:

Save for one or two men – snipers – at the sap-head, the country was deserted. No sign of humanity – a dead land[...] there was no sound but a cuckoo in a shell-torn poplar. Then as a rabbit in the early morning comes out to crop the grass, a German stepped over the enemy trench – the only living thing in sight. "I'll take him," says the man near me. And like a rabbit the German falls. And again complete silence and desolation...⁷⁸

The night in particular gave voice to the silence men feared. Anticipation could draw sounds out of the air. On a night mission Alexander Gillespie listened and heard: 'It was a still warm night, and we waited there a long time, expecting to hear the bombs go off. There was a low moon, and a great deal of summer lightning, but it was very quiet, except for a little sniping, and the rustling noises in the long grass.' We do not find out what the rustling noises were, but to record them suggests that there was more in Gillespie's mind than just grass waving in the darkness.⁷⁹ The much-loved song of the unseen nightingale might soothe or disturb. Lance Corporal Harold

⁷⁶ Theodore Wilson, letter to his aunt, 27 April, 1916, in *ibid.*, 298.

⁷⁷ Donaldson, letter to his mother, 14 November, 1917, in *ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁸ Ivar Campbell, letter, date unknown, in Laffin, *Letters*, 37.

⁷⁹ 24 May, 1915, *Letters from Flanders*, 168.

Chapin described to his wife the sensations of visiting a wood where graves had been placed: 'Over them in the moonlight a nightingale was singing loud and sweet. Its first notes were so close and so low I was startled.'⁸⁰ Sweet, but startling, were the sounds of nature and their associated quietudes in the trenches.

How could a pleasing rhythm to sound events be found? Trees encountered in the night might be silent, solemn friends, or they might appear as phantoms. Sometimes in the 'thick darkness', trees would keep watch over Edmund Blunden and his men. Near Hornby Trench with his signallers he reported the following impression: 'Where we lay, there were in the darkness several tall tree-stumps above, and it felt like a friendly ghost that watched the proceedings'.⁸¹ Even mutilated trees might act as sentinels in the gloom. Unharmed they could be 'noble' and 'a romance and poetry understood by all'.⁸² But in the dreaded Thiepval Wood, 'ghostly gallows-trees made no sound nor movement'. Elsewhere, 'one stunted willow' haunted the memory – for Blunden it called to mind Dante's trees in which men and their souls were bound forever into gnarled trunks.⁸³ Sometimes Blunden's trees could be companions even if they were not very talkative – one 'sad guard of trees dripping with the dankness of autumn had nothing to say but sempiternal syllables'.⁸⁴ Blunden's ambivalence underlines the impossible balancing of the sonic pattern in the trenches, where threat was possible everywhere.

Sensing eternal continuity

Part of the relationship men develop with nature's soundings is closely rooted in the springtime return of new life, and this is heralded by birdsong. 'To-day the frost is all away and we have something like a mild spring day. The birds have been singing since our stand to arms, and various chaffinches and wagtails have come to look at me in my dug-out'.⁸⁵ Green shoots appear, orchards continue to blossom close behind the lines, while flowers sprout from incongruous decimation. All these gain favour and attention and gladden many men, yet birdsong is perhaps the most powerful sign of regeneration in the trench landscape for its broadcast energy. This energy is largely male bravura performance to attract mates and to command over territory. It was not necessarily only bird-minded men who grasped this gendered signalling of sexual determination. More likely is that many who heard a thrush or a blackbird in full voice

⁸⁰ Harold Chapin, letter to his wife, 4 May, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 71.

⁸¹ Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 157.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁵ Alexander Gillespie, letter, 10 March, 1915, *Letters from Flanders*, 42.

were taken back to their school-days of messing about outdoors and springtime egg-collecting.⁸⁶

Birdsong sounded out the continuity of all nature in its vital pulsations across the trenches. The announcement was a reminder that nature, which men were still part of, continued its pattern unhindered by the trials of human life. If the tiny specks of bird life could thrive amid the decimation all around, men might stand a chance too. The rhythms and order of birdsong's cadences most pointedly fought against the transience of human life in the trenches because the flow of notes, that some heard as music, continued through time. The notes pointed forward to the future, while shell bursts promised at any moment to banish all future.

The pacing out of the day and night with song is most clearly found in the lark's heralding of the morning, the nightingale the evening. For Ernest Nottingham, the ecstatic song of the lark was 'inseparably connected with "stand to" in the trenches'.⁸⁷ To hear the lark an hour before dawn was to know one had survived another night: 'They are wonderful after a night of doubt and terror', wrote Harold Rayner of the Devonshires.⁸⁸ To hear the nightingale in the darkness was to be given hope, at least for those moments, that all was well under the stars.

The routines of advance and retirement of troops (three or four days in the line, three in reserve, four or more in the lines behind) created a pattern in which chaos and death would be exchanged for glimpses of the pastoral with all its gentle suggestions of timelessness and growth. Second Lieutenant William Dyson wrote to his brother of the routine behind the line: 'After breakfast rest awhile, walk about the orchards listening to the guns and the birds'.⁸⁹ Behind the line, a stillness could be found, one free from fear. Edmund Blunden had a nose for such places. Three kilometres from the Front at an 'elementary gas course' Blunden found that 'the war allowed a country-rectory quietude and lawny coolness' to pervade, and that the summer could 'multiply his convolvulus, his linnets and butterflies'.⁹⁰ Blunden was sensitive to such sensations, but he was surely not the only one.

⁸⁶ Moss, *A Bird in the Bush*, 93.

⁸⁷ Ernest Nottingham, letter to a friend, 27 March, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 202.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 51.

⁸⁹ William Dyson, letter to his brother, 5 July, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 103.

⁹⁰ *Undertones of War*, 24.

Nurturing nestlings

There was a particular rhythmic comfort in observing the routines of nesting birds, to-ing and fro-ing in the most astonishing places, often very close to men. Charles Raven was a frontline army chaplain in France in 1915-17. In his book *In Praise of Birds* he recalled an encounter that buoyed up his exhausted battalion. Returning to the line near Vimy, reduced to 150 men of 800, a ‘miracle happened’:

Head-quarters was in an old signallers’ station, and its entrance was festooned with German wires and decorated with insulators. On one of these a pair of Swallows were building. Those birds were angels in disguise. It is a truism that one touch of nature makes the whole world kin: those blessed birds brought instant relief to the nerves and tempers of the mess. They were utterly fearless, flying in and out among the sand-bags, making the nest ready for its treasures.⁹¹

Raven continues by telling how the nesting pair were regarded with devoted affection by his battalion, their nest protected while large sums were staked on the date of the first egg’s arrival. A trench periscope was used to officially verify the contents of the nest. Raven is delighted at the effect the birds have had on morale.

No one could be down-hearted when the early “stand-to” was terminated by the carolling of the cock, and we rushed back to see whether the hen had laid overnight. Blessed birds, they were an allegory of the part which Nature can play for her eldest children when their birthright of toil presses heavily.⁹²

There is sentimentality and religiosity in Raven’s account, but the witnessing and contact with nature in transformation was more than this. What is important to note is the caring of the soldiers for the nesting birds, their participation in the success of new life, the optimism for the future that was not theirs but reflected a sense of kinship with these small creatures that would soon be independent and fly away. It is not an unusual tale.⁹³

This unstoppable progress of nature affects men. It is also a crucial antidote to the death that surrounds them. The sonic is a useful way to assess the urgency of nature, because nature sounds as it lives and moves. A sobering contrast of nature’s sonic energy off-set by the obscenities of the sounds of a dying man, about to approach the ultimate silence, is present in this letter from Captain Wilson of the Sherwood

⁹¹ Charles Raven, *In Praise of Birds* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1925), 5.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹³ Alexander Gillespie’s letters home told of sparrows nesting precariously near his trench in May and June 1915 (*Letters from Flanders*, 143, 199). Larks nest in shell-holes in H. H. Munro’s essay, ‘Birds on the Western Front’ (*The Square Egg*, 133-4). Monitoring the habits and migratory motions of birds in Germany during WWII provided a stabilising routine for prisoners of war, according to Derek Niemann, *Birds in a Cage: Warburg, Germany, 1941. Four P.O.W. Birdwatchers, the Unlikely Beginnings of British Wildlife Conservation* (London: Short Books, 2013).

Foresters to his aunt. First, Wilson marvels at the animation brought by spring in 1916, presided over by larks and bees:

Then a bare field strewn with barbed wire – rusted a sort of Titian Red – out of which a hare came just now, and sat up with fear in his eyes and the sun shining red through his ears. Then the trench. An indescribable mingling of the artificial with the natural. Piled earth with groundsel and great flaming dandelions, and chickweed, and pimpernels, running riot over it. Decayed sandbags, new sandbags, boards, dropped ammunition, empty tins, corrugated iron, a smell of boots, and stagnant water and burnt powder and oil and men, the occasional bang of a rifle, and the click of a bolt, the occasional crack of a bullet coming over, or the wailing diminuendo of a ricochet. And over everything the larks and a blessed bee or two.⁹⁴

Later in the letter, Wilson tells his aunt something of the ‘purgatory’ that co-exists with spring growth, something he has recently witnessed: ‘a bright-eyed fellow suddenly turned into a goggling idiot, with his own brains trickling down into his eyes from under his cap’. This terrible juxtaposition of the skylark’s ecstasy and the bumbling of bees with the sound of a man’s final moments, can only be related to his aunt in England *because* the sounds of nature will endure and remain, as Wilson says, ‘over everything’. This is how in part men survive the war and are able to carry on living and fighting – by seeing, but just as powerfully by hearing, nature calling out and announcing its aliveness in spite of the disaster of war. There is some small hope that by association and by inspiration, men may be able to carry on and continue the rhythm of life with the birds and bees. Wilson says: ‘even the beauty of Spring has something of purgatory about it because all things are seen through a view of obscenity’. But without the spring, what would become of him with only the obscene remaining?

Birds of a timeless universe

Birds were seen to call out ancient rhythms that pre-date human activity in the world and will continue without them. I think we can speak about rhythm in bird song, as patterns and repetition are central and more prominent to human ears than musicality. An eternal continuity of the nightingale’s song was perceived from Alexander Gillespie’s dug-out in the small hours of the morning in May 1915. Listening to the song between the bursts of gunfire, he wrote:

There was something infinitely sweet and sad about it, as if the countryside were singing gently to itself, in the midst of all our noise and confusion and muddy work; so that you felt the nightingale’s song was the only real thing which would remain when all the rest was long past and forgotten. It is such an

⁹⁴ Theodore Wilson, letter to his aunt, 27 April, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 296-9.

old song too, handed on from nightingale to nightingale through the summer nights of so many innumerable years...⁹⁵

As nature's singers and nest-builders, birds could be considered part of the timeless natural order of the cosmos. Soldiers in their predicament of the trenches looked for ways in which they could find meaning in events that were not confined to men's struggles. Five days before he was killed in action, Lieutenant Robert Sterling, a Royal Scots Fusilier, wrote to a friend in Glasgow:

I've been longing for some link with the normal universe detached from the storm [...] The enemy had just been shelling our reserve trenches, and a Belgian patrol behind us had been replying, when there fell a few minutes' silence; and I still crouching expectantly in the trench, suddenly saw a pair of thrushes building a nest in a "bare ruin'd choir" of a tree, only about five yards behind our line. At the same time a lark began to sing in the sky above the German trenches. It seemed almost incredible at the time, but now, whenever I think of those nest-builders and that all but "sightless song", they seem to repeat in some degree the very essence of the Normal and Unchangeable Universe carrying on unhindered and careless amid the corpses and the bullets and the madness...⁹⁶

The indifference of an unchangeable universe carrying on without humans might have been demoralising, but for Sterling, the thrush and the lark in fact brought him comfort. The rhythm of nature would proceed and all meaning would not be lost in this war, even if men were to die. Writing after the war, Edward Grey, who served as British Foreign Secretary until December 1916, found security in the beauty and order he heard in birdsong and nature at large. 'Chaos is repulsive', he wrote, and all people have 'the same impulse to search for law in Nature'.⁹⁷ The law that he and Sterling had pondered was that men could only impede their own continuity, not that of the cosmos, which was perfect and permanent. The heavens were not subject to human meddling. By witnessing and accepting these bird routines as indicative of a greater system, Grey ruminated, humans could forget themselves and be 'free for a time from moral doubts and strivings'.⁹⁸ These universal rhythms allowed humans to give up self-consciousness and console themselves with the belief in something greater.

⁹⁵ 24 April, 1915, *Letters from Flanders*, 111.

⁹⁶ Robert Sterling, letter to a friend, 18 April, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 263.

⁹⁷ Edward Grey, *The Charm of Birds* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), 234.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

Resilience and ‘carrying on’ in birds and men

‘We have a favourite blackbird who sits up in the tree above us, and answers when the men whistle to him, no matter how heavy the firing may be.’ Alexander Gillespie of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders wrote home about his blackbird on 14 March 1915, acknowledging in the same letter heavy losses in his battalion.⁹⁹ This blackbird was a kind of pet to the men, a creature to converse with that was removed from the muck of the trench works, and one who carried on with no fear under fire. More than a pet, this blackbird is a friend – that Gillespie reports a dialogue between the soldiers and the bird underlines this relationship.

In assessing some of the letters, diaries, poetry and writing of the war, perhaps the most apparent sign of hope and survival is that provided by birdlife. This was by no means a matter simply of romantic sentiment or symbolism, though these were at work. Birds had a reputation for toughness and were employed in military operations because they could accomplish tasks that humans and other animals could not. Messenger pigeons were a familiar sight to infantrymen. The Pigeon Service Corps made use of them throughout the Somme offensive, and after that experience some 5,000 birds were added to the service because the birds almost always got through to deliver their message.¹⁰⁰ Canaries too were part of the combat scene once the Mines Committee had recommended that two or three birds be kept at rescue stations to test for carbon monoxide.¹⁰¹ Tunnelling teams relied on their sensitivity to poisonous gas and through this partnership canaries gained admiration for their robustness. A story circulated from a soldier, published in the *Daily Mail* and the ornithological journal *Bird Notes and News*, praised a hard-working company canary. In all conditions: ‘He would do his job under ground, and as often as not reach the surface again a little limp form lying at the bottom of his cage; he never failed us though’.¹⁰² These working birds were known for their spirit. More than that, birds were seen to be *brave*.

Pigeons and canaries were not the birds that appeared in soldiers’ writing, however much their fortitude was respected. It was the activities and singing of wild birds on the Front that attracted most attention. These birds would inspire with their apparent resilience, their ability to carry on and their claim to territory, which often appeared precarious to say the least. It was their song and their nest-building in spring that

⁹⁹ 14 March, 1915, *Letters from Flanders*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Gardiner, *The Animals’ War*, 98–101.

¹⁰¹ Hugh Gladstone, *Birds and the War* (London: Skeffington, 1919), 22.

¹⁰² Push Pick, ‘V. C. Canaries’, *Daily Mail*, 12 September, 1918, 2.

roused men in particular. The persistence of these birds could be seen as resilience, and resilience was what men needed to keep from becoming victims of the war. To survive, all soldiers had to become hardened, nerveless, able ‘to stand without trembling’, as infantry sergeant Marc Bloch put it.¹⁰³ Singing birds were a reminder of the kind of courage that men would have to foster. Captain Eric Wilkinson of the West Yorkshires dedicated a poem to the strength expressed in birdsong, calling it ‘To a Choir of Birds’. This choir, he wrote, was ‘insensible to mortal fear’. ‘While murk of battle drifts on’, the choir of birds was undeterred. He finished on this note: ‘The world is stark with blood and hate – but ye – / Sing on! Sing on! In careless ecstasy’.¹⁰⁴

‘Nature does her best for us even here’, Harold Macmillan wrote to his mother in June 1916. From his dug-out he could see a ruined farm whose garden still kept ‘a civilised look’. Nature could be relied upon to keep up appearances. On top of these observations, and most surprising to him, the birds sang ‘merrily, for all the world as if they were in some peaceful countryside, stranger to High Explosive’.¹⁰⁵ Alexander Gillespie too found that the birds carried on twittering alongside the soundtrack of rifle-fire: ‘The birds are all singing despite the sniping, which still goes on’.¹⁰⁶ Some sensed a defiance in birdsong, that birds were stimulated to sing out against the guns. Stuart Cloete remembered in his autobiography decades later: ‘There was continuous fire. It was a background to the singing of the nightingales. It has often seemed to me that gunfire makes birds sing, or is it just that the paradox is so great that one never forgets it and always associates the two?’¹⁰⁷ There is an affirmation in all this singing in the battlefields – that life can continue and men might be part of this continuum of irrepressible life force.

Birds were not expected to be so present on the Front. Ornithologists were themselves surprised to see that birdlife continued busily on the battlefields. A letter in *The Avicultural Magazine* in 1917 told of ‘partridges running about between shell craters [...], larks singing, magpies all over the place, and a hare lopping along as if nothing were happening, with big guns roaring all round and from every side!’¹⁰⁸ In the same magazine, Lieutenant Hamilton Scott in the true list-making style of the bird-watcher recorded 74 different species during his time at the frontline.¹⁰⁹ Larks and

¹⁰³ Quoted in Habeck, ‘Technology in the War’, 102.

¹⁰⁴ Eric Wilkinson, ‘To a Choir of Birds’, in Noakes, *Voices of Silence*, 83.

¹⁰⁵ Harold Macmillan, letter, 23–4 June, 1916, in Mike Webb, *From Downing Street to the Trenches: First Hand Accounts, from the Great War, 1914–1916* (Oxford: Bodleian, 2014), 191.

¹⁰⁶ 11 March, 1915, *Letters from Flanders*, 43. Gillespie had his own trench garden, which included a clump of violets retrieved from a flooded trench and planted in half a shrapnel shell case (83)

¹⁰⁷ Stuart Cloete, *A Victorian Son: An Autobiography, 1897–1922* (London: Collins, 1972), 182.

¹⁰⁸ Albert Pam, ‘Bird Life on the Battlefields’, *The Avicultural Magazine*, 1917, 239.

¹⁰⁹ R. Hamilton Scott, ‘Birds In and Around the Firing Line’, *The Avicultural Magazine*, 1918, 247–8.

nightingales were recognised by soldiers as common songsters from home, but there was a much larger chorus to be heard in France and Flanders. Other experts noted that many of the birds seen and heard were migrants, such as the willow wren, blackcaps and tree pipits, who could have easily travelled further afield to quieter areas. Yet they were present and thriving, as if they were keeping men company.

It has to be said that for some soldiers, singing birds were a jarring insensitivity amid the trials of trench life. H. H. Munro noticed how the skylark had ‘stuck tenaciously to the meadows and crop-lands’ of the trenches, but he found the ‘song of ecstatic jubilation’ in the gloom preceding a rainy dawn too much. To him it could sound ‘horribly forced and insincere’.¹¹⁰ The throbbing song of a nightingale in a wood once shattered and reeking of poison gas was an appalling irony to Paul Nash. ‘Ridiculous, mad incongruity!’ he wrote to his wife; ‘One can not think which is more absurd, war or Nature’.¹¹¹ Some soldiers took pot-shots at birds because of the unbearable contrast they made in their song and flight with the men’s earth-bound struggles.¹¹² ‘What the ‘ell is ‘e singing about?’ was the irritation expressed by a prostrate ‘British Tommy’ when a lark darted into the sky and began its serenade after a day of terrible fighting, according to the *London Mail*.¹¹³

Nevertheless, such accounts further underline the perceived resilience of birds. There was a Britishness about this behaviour. The determination to ‘carry on’, as a specific injunction to maintain war-time resilience, had featured prominently in private and public discourses at home during WWI.¹¹⁴ The idea expressed the determination to ‘carry on business as usual’, a phrase used by Lloyd George. It referred to the morale-boosting resolve to maintain quintessentially British ways of life whatever the war might bring. To find birds familiar from home singing on the battlefield was in some sense to witness patriotic behaviour. That these were foreign birds on foreign ground did not seem to interfere with the perception of birdsong as a display of patriotic determination. And at home, heroic stories of the birds on the Front circulated in the newspapers. Though birds were behaving in the same ways on both sides of the line,

¹¹⁰ Munro, *The Square Egg*, 133.

¹¹¹ Paul Nash, letter to his wife, 7 March, 1917. Tate Archive: Letters and Papers of Paul Nash. Reference TGA 8313. Accessed 23 May, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/tga-8313/letters-and-papers-of-paul-nash>. See also Nash’s painting, ‘Spring in the Trenches’, almost as ironic, if not as bitter, as ‘We are Making a New World’.

¹¹² Haslam, ed., *Ford Madox Ford*, xxiv.

¹¹³ Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 123. Dakers (*The Countryside at War*, 173) reports a similar frustration of a Welsh soldier recorded by Ivor Gurney: “‘Listen to the damned bird”, he said. “All through that bombardment in the pauses I could hear the infernal silly ‘Cuckoo, cuckoo’ sounding while Owen was lying in my arms covered with blood. How shall I ever listen again.””

¹¹⁴ The origins of the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ slogan have been located in WWII with the activity of the Ministry of Information, but the roots of this idea are earlier. See Lynda Mugglestone, ‘Rethinking the Birth of an Expression. Keeping Calm and “Carrying On” in World War One’, *English Words in Wartime*, 2 August, 2016. Accessed 2 September, 2016, <https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com/2016/08/02/rethinking-the-birth-of-an-expression-keeping-calm-and-carrying-on-in-world-war-one/>.

these stories were used to contribute to British propaganda. Birds on the Front were claimed as British.

The iconic nightingale received the most attention and praise, news appearing in *The Times*, *The Scotsman* and the *Manchester Guardian* of the bird singing in the trenches night and day, in woods reeking of poison gas when men wore respirators and near active gun batteries.¹¹⁵ The skylark's glorious singing over the trenches, while armies were at death-grips, featured widely in the press during 1916 and 1917. The song of the lark at dawn was 'as usual as the song of the sniper's bullet', proclaimed *The Daily News and Leader*.¹¹⁶ In the notorious first days of the Somme in July 1916, *The Times* reported the skylark's refusal to quit its habitat and that they could be heard singing during battle 'whenever there was a lull in the almost incessant fire'.¹¹⁷ Even no man's land proved an attractive place for thousands of birds to nest and rear their young, according to the literary magazine *The English Review*.¹¹⁸ Britons had chosen to claim that French and Flemish birdlife was singing out and carrying on in support of allied efforts. While birds were understood to be indifferent to the affairs of men, to be living for themselves and singing for their own purposes – careless ecstasy, Eric Wilkinson had called it – they were still claimed as taking sides and championing Britain's efforts.¹¹⁹

There must have been a different kind of propaganda at work when this extraordinary tale appeared about British soldiers in France reduced to tears by birds in song. In the *Daily Mail*, next to articles about blinded soldiers returning home as heroes and trade restrictions with the enemy, this small piece nestled:

The Rev E. L. Watson, an Army chaplain, said that during the bombardment of Neuve Chapelle several men were seen to be crying. When he asked why, they said that during the lulls of the bombardment, birds could be heard singing. Over one trench hung a tree, and on a bough were two birds preening their feathers and twittering.¹²⁰

Singing birds in this case are presumably used to illustrate the sensitivity of British soldiers to the charms and perfection of natural beauty. Their tears are indicative of

¹¹⁵ Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 111–114.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹⁷ Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 48.

¹¹⁸ Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 104.

¹¹⁹ Nature myths were strong in German culture and war experience too. Alex Potts argues that every bit as potent as the English meadow and village was the German forest (Wald) and village (Dorf): "Constable Country", 162. George Mosse argues that the symbolism of the tree and the wood was specifically German and associated with 'innocent nature'. To be buried within 'heroes' groves' of trees was to be given a restful memorial: *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 110. Erich Maria Remarque's protagonist finds himself transported by the wind in the leaves of poplar trees to his boyhood: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 85–8.

¹²⁰ 'Bird's Song on Battlefield', *Daily Mail*, 27 April, 1915, 3.

their humanity and their civilisation, but at risk in this story are their soldierly qualities of manliness and endurance. If these British soldiers were distinguished from the barbaric and sadistic Hun by their fine feelings, they were at the same time inadvertently depicted as part of an army who would not be successful.¹²¹



Figure 3. Nurses with pet canaries on an ambulance train near Doullens, 27 April 1918 (IWM).

In large part, though, wild birds were taken to be agents of British fighting spirit at its moral best. Pet canaries were given a role too. They had been commonplace in domestic working- and middle-class culture (along with others in the finch family) since the mid-nineteenth century, and much loved by miners, who set up ‘fancies’ to breed canaries.¹²² For generations, canaries had been kept for their cheerful song and perkiness,¹²³ and in wartime this was seen to be a tonic that would build strength and assist recovery in injured soldiers. Canaries were put to work in ambulance trains to ‘cheer our wounded soldiers with their sweet song’ (Figure 3).¹²⁴ At home, Private

¹²¹ The stereotype of the Hun, developed through propaganda about their atrocities, provided the basis for a moral offensive against a German society founded upon militaristic values, thereby bringing home the unimaginable consequences of defeat. See David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914–1918* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

¹²² Cocker and Mabey, *Birds Britannica*, 442.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹²⁴ Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 25.

Dobson's recovery in a Southampton hospital was aided when the hospital arranged for a Yorkshire showbird to be sent, which sang in the sunlight beside his bed.¹²⁵ These stories reveal an intimate link between Britons and birds. The song of the bird often served to lift the human spirit and in the final section of this chapter, the ideal of birdsong and flight will be explored.

Skyward escape with the lark

Perhaps the most important aspect of birdlife on the Front for soldiers was its occupation of the sky. Birdsong was airborne and free. Flight could not but suggest the dream of escape. In no bird did these facets come to life more than in the skylark with its ascending flight and song. The lark was a well-known field and meadow bird in Britain, yet it had been invested with magic in poetry: 'the Lark is a mighty Angel', Blake wrote; a creature from 'heaven, or near it', Shelley felt.¹²⁶ In the first week of the war, on Margate's cliff top, Ralph Vaughan Williams was writing the musical setting for George Meredith's poem and the moods he was working with were simultaneously emerging in the trenches.¹²⁷ For Captain Edward de Stein of the Machine Gun Corps, in his poem 'To a Skylark Behind our Trenches', the bird was a 'happy sprite'.¹²⁸ The skylark was associated with the heavenly vault untouched by the war, its skyward ascent away from the trenches and corpses could lift men up and away, at least momentarily. Always hard to see, the sound of the song drew attention to the freshness of the sky which was renewed each morning.¹²⁹ Siegfried Sassoon recalled thinking once at the evening stand-to that 'the sky was one of the redeeming features of the war'.¹³⁰

The earthbound realities of trench experience necessitated alternative imaginings. Escape with the lark would take men away from the stasis of trench life, the mud, the immobility. Men became part of the landscape itself, dug-in, mud-caked, trench-footed and concealed in the ground like the rats they shared it with. Entrapment in this world under the weight of shelling put men under extreme psychological strain, which became all the worse if you could not move.¹³¹ Writing about effects of high

¹²⁵ 'Soldier and Song Bird', *Daily Mail*, 21 January, 1916, 3.

¹²⁶ Samuel Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 234; Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'To A Skylark', in *The Bird-Lovers' Anthology*, ed. C. Scollard and J. B. Rittenhouse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 56. Lark symbolism endures in literature and manages to just avoid cliché in Faulk's novel *Birdsong* (London: Vintage, 1993), where a lark 'singing in the unharmed air' (485) signals the end, not of a bombardment or battle, but of the war, for protagonist Stephen Wraysford.

¹²⁷ Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 51.

¹²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 79-80.

¹²⁹ Fussell, *The Great War*, 51-2.

¹³⁰ Quoted from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* in *ibid.*, 52.

¹³¹ Leed discusses the connections between immobility in the trenches and war neurosis: *No Man's Land*, 180-92.

explosive shell-fire on the mental state of soldiers, the physician David Forsythe remarked that 'experience has shown that a high degree of nervous tension is commonest among men who have, perforce, to remain inactive while being shelled'.¹³² The strangeness of the trench scene begged for relief. Strangest of all was the presence of death all around.¹³³ Some frontline areas were like graveyards, Rowland Feilding observed: 'Many soldiers lie buried in the parapet, and in some cases their feet project into the trench'.¹³⁴ Ghostly remains littered abandoned trenches, 'old uniforms, and a great many bones, like broken bird cages'.¹³⁵ David Jones, a private in the Welsh Fusiliers, wrote of 'a night-feast on the broken of us' in his long prose-poem 'In Parenthesis'. Of the sounds of dead men being feasted upon he was explicit: 'You can hear the silence of it: / You can hear the rat of no-man's-land / rut-out intricacies, / weasel-out his patient workings, / scrut, scrut, sscrut'.¹³⁶ Worse than the sound of the dead was the sound of their dying. There was 'relief that the thing has ceased to groan: that the bullet or bomb that made the man an animal has now made the animal a corpse', admitted Charles Sorley.¹³⁷ Wilfred Owen's unforgettable 'guttering, choking' of a man overcome by gas still shocks. Writing home on 4 February 1917, Owen articulated the grim picture of the earthbound better than anyone. He described:

the universal pervasion of *Ugliness*. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language [...] everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth.¹³⁸

Some kind of escape from these horrors was longed for. It was found in the camaraderie of men, striving together, telling jokes, drinking tea and never speaking of 'anything depressing'.¹³⁹ All this 'fellow-feeling' was necessary.¹⁴⁰ But only so much could be expected from humans making a war like this.

It was the lark that turned eyes upwards, away from the trench system. At dawn, when there was usually a stillness intact from the night, the lark's trill would rise, taking men with it. For Ernest Nottingham, though he writes of the 'hardening of experience', the soaring song at stand-to could lift him up and away from the 'bones and barbed

¹³² D. Forsythe, 'Functional Nerve Disease and the Shock of Battle', *Lancet*, 25 December (1915): 1400.

¹³³ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 18, 19, 52, 53.

¹³⁴ Rowland Feilding, letter, 8 October, 1917, in Laffin, *Letters*, 95.

¹³⁵ Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 13.

¹³⁶ David Jones, 'In Parenthesis', in Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War*, 202-3.

¹³⁷ Charles Sorley, letter, 26 August, 1915, in Housman, *War Letters*, 251.

¹³⁸ Cecil Day-Lewis, ed., *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: New Directions Books, 1965), 22. 'He plunges at me guttering, choking, drowning' comes after the gas attack in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth': Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War*, 155.

¹³⁹ 'In our mess we never allow any mention of anything depressing', Captain Colwyn Philipps wrote to his mother, 13 November, 1914, in Housman, *War Letters*, 213.

¹⁴⁰ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 225. John Laffin's collection of letters from the Front makes clear the importance of the love felt between fellow men: *Letters*, 9, 34, 108.

wire' that he had seen that night.¹⁴¹ Returning from night duty, Private Isaac Rosenberg and his patrol were enchanted by a burst of lark song from the early morning gloom. He knew that 'death could drop from the dark' as they trudged nervously back to camp. But the larks formed an invisible shield. In 'Returning we hear the larks', he wrote these lines:

But hark! joy – joy – strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.¹⁴²

As Paul Fussell writes, the sound of the skylark provided men with 'evidence that ecstasy was still an active motif in the universe'.¹⁴³ The delight of the lark's song had the potential to draw men's minds out of the material world and into the heights of reverie, a place of dreams and sustenance. John W. Streets, a Derbyshire miner before the war with the rank of Sergeant, found the lark could transform his spirits: 'My soul rushed singing to the ether sky'.¹⁴⁴ The trilling of the bird spoke even to the 'long-lost dead' in ways that 'gave the kiss of life', Streets felt, perhaps because the lark sang so close to heaven. These are powerful testimonies, and there are many others, that speak of more than the joy of hearing a lark in song. There is also the desire in these reports, poetic though many are, to rise up and to not look down. These are momentary releases from the mud and mess, the antithesis to the most common soldier's dream of being buried alive in a bunker by a heavy shell.¹⁴⁵

Captain Colwyn Philipps, a Sandhurst professional soldier posted with the Royal Horse Guards, kept a notebook on the Front. It was found after his death near Ypres in May 1915. There was a poem there that explored how he might rise above the 'earth's stain', beyond the sky and into the cosmos. He felt that the night-time was when this might happen, a time when stillness was in the air. Then, for a short time, he would try to find his sense of God, reaching towards the stars that were suspended above the battlefields, before returning again to the world of war. This connection to the peacefulness of cosmic nature, made in a visit of just 'an hour', was an escape he needed. Philipps' poem, quoted here, is marked by his father, who published his poetry and letters from the Front in 1915, 'Found in his note-book when his kit came home.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Nottingham, letter, in Housman, *War Letters*, 202.

¹⁴² Isaac Rosenberg, 'Returning we hear the larks', in Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War*, 139.

¹⁴³ *The Great War*, 242.

¹⁴⁴ John W. Streets, 'Shelley in the Trenches', in Noakes, *Voices of Silence*, 83.

¹⁴⁵ Leed, *No Man's Land*, 22. Burial alive was not uncommon and instances could often precipitate psychological breakdown.

¹⁴⁶ Philipps, *Verses*, 126.

There is a healing magic in the night,
 The breeze blows cleaner than it did by day,
 Forgot the fever of the fuller light,
 And sorrow sinks insensibly away
 As if some saint a cool white hand did lay
 Upon the brow, and calm the restless brain.
 The moon looks down with pale unpassioned ray –
 Sufficient for the hour is its pain.
 Be still and feel the night that hides away earth's stain.
 Be still and loose the sense of God in you,
 Be still and send your soul into the all,
 The vasty distance where the stars shine blue,
 No longer antlike on the earth to crawl.
 Released from time and sense of great or small,
 Float on the pinions of the Night-Queen's wings;
 Soar till the swift inevitable fall
 Will drag you back into all the world's small things;
 Yet for an hour be one with all escapèd things.

Imaginative transportation home was another mode of escape for the trench mind that larks and other birds would provoke, sometimes with melancholy. Frederick Keeling, a Sergeant Major in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, found himself plagued by nostalgia:

Every morning when I was in the front-line trenches I used to hear the larks singing soon after we stood-to about dawn. But those wretched larks made me more sad than almost anything else out here... Their sounds are so closely associated in my mind with peaceful summer days in gardens or pleasant landscapes in Blighty.¹⁴⁷

'Loved to our Gloucester eyes' were the birds that Private Ivor Gurney and his regiment encountered around the trenches. Hedge sparrows, 'laughing linnets' and a yellowhammer were treated as old friends visiting the soldiers from their home county where the men associated them with quite specific rural localities, named in Gurney's poem 'Birds'.¹⁴⁸ It was a surprise and a delight to see and hear 'some visitor from home with a touch of the rhymes'. Home had travelled to the trenches with these visitors, as far as Gurney and his mates were concerned. When Paul Nash spotted a swallow from a hillside, he immediately wrote to his wife: 'Ever since he has haunted me. I can't help thinking he may have been on his way to England where my sweetheart is and you may see him just as I did skimming the fields.'¹⁴⁹ His swallow was a messenger to his wife at home, a metaphor for connection. Men thrilled to the

¹⁴⁷ Frederick Keeling, letter, 25 March, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 164. There are other examples of birdsong triggering nostalgia. Lieutenant Trotter in R. C. Sherriff's autobiographical play 'Journey's End' comments: 'Funny about that bird. Made me feel quite braced up. Sort of made me think about my garden of an evening – walking round in me slippers after supper, smoking me pipe': Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow*, 32.

¹⁴⁸ Ivor Gurney, 'Birds', in Armitage and Dee, *The Poetry of Birds*, 54.

¹⁴⁹ Paul Nash, letter to his wife, 26 April, 1917. Tate Archive: Letters and Papers of Paul Nash. Reference TGA 8313.

reality of freedom of flight that birds had. This mastery of the air seemed to promote feelings of contact and communication, away from the trench experience.

Birds shared the sky with aircraft, of course. To sight an aircraft was a greater fascination than a bird though. There was fear in enemy machines, but the airman took on the role of a superior being in comparison to the fighting masses on the ground.¹⁵⁰ The airman was free and worked at a distance from the real war. He could fly with 'a sort of triumphant calm through the tiny snow-white puffs of shrapnel' that would surround them.¹⁵¹ Skylarks, high up, were often confused at first sight with aircraft.¹⁵² In this muddling of aircraft and larks there is also the romance of flight and the perceived imperviousness of the flier. In one of Edward Thomas' typical juxtapositions of war technology and birdlife he wrote this entry in his diary in February 1917: 'Black-headed buntings talk, rooks caw, lovely white puffs of shrapnel round planes high up.'¹⁵³ The war planes and the birds co-existed happily for Thomas in part because of the wonderment of flight.

By assuming an aerial perspective, the soldier at the Front could gain a psychic distance from the crushing actualities of trench war. Eric Leed has said that 'the flier, in fact and fantasy, keeps open the possibility of an escape'.¹⁵⁴ A bird or an aircraft could offer a vantage over the scenes that the soldier was participating in and secure his survival in the mind's eye. But a bird was better because it was not involved in the war. Its song was interchangeable with flight, important for soldiers whose vision was always constricted – to hear a bird was to fly. Looking through the eyes of the bird or riding on its back was to oversee, with God-like vision, a purpose in the war. Or perhaps by placing oneself behind the eyes of a bird one could escape the point of view of the human.¹⁵⁵ Or one could soar on the breeze, travel across the Channel and, in no time, find oneself at home among the intimacies of loved ones. Birdsong could whisk the imagination upwards and homewards.

¹⁵⁰ Ralph Barker, *The Royal Flying Corps in World War One* (London: Robinson, 2002), 278. See Mosse on the status of German pilots as chivalric and emblematic of a new Germany before and during the war: *Fallen Soldiers*, 118-121.

¹⁵¹ Theodore Wilson, letter to his aunt, 27 April, 1916, in Housman, *War Letters*, 297.

¹⁵² Moss, *A Bird in the Bush*, 116.

¹⁵³ 14 February, 1917, in Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 155.

¹⁵⁴ *No Man's Land*, 134.

¹⁵⁵ John Gray has touched on these ideas in his analysis of human-animal relations, considering in particular J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine*. See John Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths* (London: Penguin, 2014), 148-9.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how soldiers engaged with the natural and non-human soundscape of the trenches, wondering how the sounds of nature would be evident at all, given the standard accounts of noise and the visualisations of destruction of the environment in which men existed. What emerges are the realities and fantasies of hearing birdsong in the trenches, while soldiers conduct their routines of listening to airborne ordnance. Sources indicate a surprising presence of birdsong in the minds of combatants. Using Schafer's nomenclature, birdsong could be described as a 'keynote' of the trenches because of its 'pervasive influence' on the behaviour and moods of combatants.¹⁵⁶ Set against the technological violence in which they made their performances, larks, nightingales, blackbirds, sparrows and cuckoos are heard and transmitted in letters to loved ones. Amidst the unpredictability of exploding bombs, and the fear and dread the noise brought, birdsong reordered the soundscape of the trenches and introduced moments of harmony. Song could occupy the terrible silences that descended between bombardments and throughout the night watch. Singing birds became part of a trench narrative told in private writings and published forms, which I am exposing thoroughly for the first time. A question emerges as to how much could actually be heard amid the cacophonies of shelling – nightingales heard through the 'continuous roar' – but this doubt needs to be considered in several ways, not least because both the song and the roar have been accentuated in soldiers' accounts.

First of all, the Western Front was a place in which listening for danger was a primary mode of behaviour. Enemy activity could often be best assessed through the ears rather than the eyes, and listening afforded a safer way to keep out of the path of shells, shrapnel and bullets. Such aural acuity brought all sounds, those great and small, to the fore as men strove to survive. As they acquired knowledge of the sounds of weaponry, at the same time, soldiers developed knowledge of the sound of rats, the sound of wire being repaired, the shrieks of dying men and the songs of birds. Secondly, the meanings of the sounds took on heightened significance and were subjected to new interpretations. Of all the non-manmade sounds to be experienced, birdsong took on special meaning, full of immediate reassurance in its familiarity from home, and symbolic value of hope and freedom. Men felt they had a kind of dialogue with birds. They were spoken to as well as serenaded. I have argued that this relationship with birds through their song centred on presentness, on existence

¹⁵⁶ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 9.

in that moment when a bird's song was heard, more than drawing on evocations of pastoral themes and motifs. Birds were not heard everyday by any means, yet birdsong might intervene in many of the everyday functions on the Front, those of waiting, staying connected with family and friends, camaraderie and managing fear.¹⁵⁷

Concentrating on the presentness of birdsong, alongside the mythic values attached to it in British culture, has revealed a set of relationships that men developed with birdlife in their trench-world. My analysis has found that birdsong marked out time in a way that emphasised the rhythms and continuities of the natural world that men still felt part of. The sound ascribed a meaning and patterning to the world when it seemed to resist all patterning. For many officers and ranks the lark heralded the morning stand-to, the nightingale the evening one. These sounds called out the continuity of nature and with it the reminder of another day survived. Hearing as a primarily temporal sense, in which sound waves operate through time, is subject to such interpretations of rhythm and dis-rhythm, continuity and discontinuity. The reassurance of seasonal renewal had a marked effect on men who might see and hear several seasons pass during their service. With the springtime re-appearance of birdsong in the air was the recognition that even in war, the universe was still able to sustain the fragile new life of young birds. Men might savour and nurture this regeneration because it made them feel part of an irrepressible life force, though they knew too that they might not be part of its future.

The perceived resilience of birds, carrying on if not singing out in defiance through the chaos, was a surprise and inspiration; one claimed as a British fortitude because the species on the Front were recognised from home. Yet enjoying a bird in song or caring for nestlings could not remove men from Blunden's earthbound world of 'the glue-ridden' crater zone and the galleries of the decaying dead. Stasis and immobility in the trenches brought with it the longing for imaginative escape upwards, and the encounter with birds offered this in ways that tea-making rituals, trench humour and letters home could not. Trapped in the trench system, pinned down by the weight of shelling, men heard the trilling of the lark overhead and responded with feelings that conjured a departure to heaven. The sound drew eyes upwards to the sky, a stage onto which one could project expectations required by the war of slaughter on the ground. By assuming the perspective of a bird, the

¹⁵⁷ Tammy M. Proctor, 'The Everyday as Involved in War', in *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), accessed 1 January, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10453>.

soldier could gain psychic distance from the realities of the trenches. And escape was not pure fantasy – the sound of a bird took men home to peaceful summer days in gardens and countryside. In Fussell’s terms, this was a way indeed to ‘imaginatively protect oneself’¹⁵⁸ against the calamities of the trenches, yet it was more than simply a return to the pastoral. The dreams of flight that men cultivated in their encounters with birdsong were journeys to the future when the war was gone and they were home again.

The new kinds of sonic sensibility that were cultivated during the war did not vanish with the sound of the guns. The next chapter explores how the continued influence and knowledge of sound was part of recuperative thinking and practice for men with shell shock and for a nation in recovery.

¹⁵⁸ *The Great War*, 235.

2. Pastoral peace and quiet for shell shock and national recovery

This chapter explores the place of the ideal of quiet in home front society during and after the war. The treatment of shell shock is the focus, as this condition and the metaphors surrounding it resonated widely through society. Quiet environments are found to have had a central and neglected place in shell shock recovery, but were in addition more broadly part of national recovery from the barbarities of war. The definition of and recovery from shell shock was dictated by political and military imperatives, and while the medical response was one of bewilderment and therapeutic experimentation, the tradition of the rest cure formed an anchor point. This chapter argues that the rest cure for shell shock was essentially a quiet cure, and that it was urban and countryside pastoral settings that provided the optimum kinds of quiet rest for recovery. Britain did not fall silent after WWI, but in its aftermath ideas of quiet and silence had new medical and cultural dimensions. The empirical use of quietude was inevitably accompanied by its authority as a trope of national identity.

Historians have generally approached shell shock treatment from a social control perspective. They have been most interested in the ways in which doctors used power and discipline to enforce conformity, influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, Andrew Scull and Thomas Szasz on asylums and madness.¹ While I consider the politics of the shell shock phenomenon, I concentrate on how the idea of the healing power invested in the peacefulness of the nation's countryside was manifested and used to care for officers and their ranks. In doing so, I assess how quietude gained in value more generally in society. Today, the shell-shocked soldier holds a central place in British imaginings of WWI. Perhaps he has been over-exposed, but it was only in 2002, with Peter Leese's *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* that the first full-length English-language historical monograph on trauma in this conflict was published. It is true that WWI was not just a 'war of shell shock', a theme emerging from the popular narrative of a futile war, nor the first conflict to see such responses.² However, the official figures, which suggest 2-4% of all admissions to British military hospitals were psychiatric battle casualties, is likely to

¹ For this argument see Mark O. Humphries and Kellen Kurchinski, 'Rest, Relax and Get Well: A Re-Conceptualisation of Great War Shell Shock Treatment', *War & Society* 27 (2008): 90-1.

² Roger Cooter, 'Malingering in Modernity: Psychological Scripts and Adversarial Encounters during the First World War', in *War, Medicine and Modernity*, ed. R. Cooter, M. Harrison and S. Sturdy (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 125-48. Pat Barker's widely-read *Regeneration*, and the subsequent film, about psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers and his officer patients Sassoon, Owen and the fictional Billy Prior, has contributed to the continued cultural resonance of shell shock.

be ‘wildly inaccurate’, Jay Winter has argued, and says nothing of the burden placed on society at large and families in particular for years or decades.³ In the decade following the Armistice about 114,600 men applied for pensions for shell shock-related disorders, yet statistics cannot convey the deep bewilderment and anxiety in the British military authorities at behaviour they could not understand, nor how shell shock became a cultural symbol of the incomprehensible madness of the conflict.⁴

For all the voluminous literature about shell shock, few scholars have highlighted the use of quiet environments as a foundation for treatment and recuperation. Fiona Reid began to explore this area when she argued that the most obvious and consistent characteristic of government plans for the post-war care of shell-shocked men lay in its commitment to a rural system of treatment.⁵ When the War Office returned shell-shocked officers to the peaceful world of a country house, it sent them back in time to an idealised pre-war England, she points out.⁶ This was more than a statement of class privilege; it drew on long-held views of the countryside as the locus of healing. Jay Winter in his most recent writing about shell shock concludes his review of the many approaches to treatment with the following statement: ‘On balance, doctors did the best they could, which many times was simply to put patients in a quiet environment, where some spent the rest of their lives.’ He footnotes his experience of meeting men like this at Warwick General Hospital in 1978, where they had been for some 60 years.⁷

The sources I have used as the substance of this chapter are very different to those of the first chapter, in which men’s feelings were a prominent evidence base. First-person accounts of shell shock are few and far between,⁸ so instead I have concentrated on the available medico-political and institutional accounts of shell shock care, together with the public debate in the newspapers. The medical expert is the chief voice to be heard, though this voice is often coloured by military and political inflections. I have based part of this chapter on the archives of Enham Trust in Hampshire, which holds material from Enham Village Centre, a unique model village community for shell-shocked men and their families. Until now, these archives have received no scholarly attention. What we know from the first chapter is that many

³ Winter, ‘Shell Shock’, 330; Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, ‘Psychiatric Battle Casualties: An Intra- and Interwar Comparison’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 178 (2001).

⁴ Anthony Richards, ‘The British Response to Shell-Shock: An Historical Essay’, in *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into ‘Shell-Shock’* (London: Imperial War Museum Military Handbook Series, 2004), iv.

⁵ *Broken Men*, 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ Winter, ‘Shell Shock’, 325.

⁸ Reid argues these voices are silent because of the difficulties in communicating such trauma and the taboo, that still exists, of admitting to suffering from mental illness: *Broken Men*, 5.

trench soldiers had a fondness for recalling the English countryside, and we can speculate that such pastoral fantasies ran deep in culture and may have influenced government decisions about how men who had been damaged by the war should be cared for. But we can't go much further. The presence of quietude and its effects has to be teased out of the sources, for it is often an implicit part of healing environments. If the use of peace and quiet is a common-sense method of recuperation after the shock of war, then I have attempted to explain the complexities of cultural logic that underpin this notion.

The broad question that galvanises this chapter is this: in what ways has the quietude of British nature been imagined and used by society as an antidote to the psychological shock of WWI? I seek to reveal how sound was considered in the treatment of shell shock in officers and rank-and-file men during and after the war. First, I consider the ideas surrounding quiet rest that in many ways dominated the many treatment regimens that were experimented with, and then go on to look in detail at two examples of pastoral quietude that officers and men received in very different settings. One is the country house and its gardens, and the second is a newly-conceived countryside community in which craft and light outdoor work were part of a curative atmosphere of tranquillity. Finally, I broaden the discussion to encompass post-war society and its attitudes to quietness in the recovery of the nation as a whole.

Quiet rest for the wounded? Theories and politics

In the summer of 1917, Siegfried Sassoon was recovering in London from a bullet through his throat. He was fragile and in 'a rotten state of nerves'. When he went for a walk he saw corpses lying about on the pavements. In the ward of his convalescence home, he found the gramophone plagued him to the limit of his patience. Sassoon longed for some peace: 'If he could only be quiet and see no one, simply watch the trees dressing up in green and feel the same himself'.⁹ There were many soldiers like Sassoon, with physical wounds, mental damage or both, who needed a ration of quiet rest in sight of nature to be able to continue.

Within the first few months of the conflict, men began to be sent home from frontline service with a perplexing array of symptoms – stupor, paralysis, tremors, nervous collapse, depression and nightmares, psoriasis, delusional states. Physicians tried all

⁹ Robert Graves wrote of Sassoon's wishes based on a letter he had received: *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin, 1960 [1929]), 211-12.

manner of treatments, reflecting the many views about the origin and nature of these disturbances. Only soldiers with the most severe symptoms were taken away from the battle and the priority was to promptly restore them to fighting effectiveness.¹⁰ Yet, until the end of 1916, significant numbers of men were sent back to Britain for treatment, the Somme offensive escalating psychiatric cases to 16,000.¹¹ Initial treatments sought to exert a disciplinary fix through the use of isolation, restricted diet and even electric shocks to alter soldiers' aberrant behaviour.¹² Such strategies aimed to deal with the apparent clash between the private intentions of the soldier and a sense of public duty. Other treatments were geared toward addressing a potential unconscious psychological conflict in the soldier's mind. This idea led to the use of hypnosis and the re-experiencing of traumatic memories to purge them of their emotional impact. A military therapist would help the man to think differently about his traumatic experiences.¹³

However, there were other equally or more effective approaches to the management of shell shock which were based primarily on the provision of rest and quietude. They were most clearly articulated after the war as part of the two-year deliberations of a committee led by Lord Southborough. The highly political 1922 *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock'* was a distillation of clinical and military expertise in shell shock gained during WWI and its aftermath.¹⁴ Evidence from influential surgeon and psychiatrist Edward Mapother, who had served in France and Mesopotamia and then at Maghull psychiatric hospital for rank-and-file soldiers, was reported as follows: 'Dr Mapother thought every anxiety neurosis case in its very early stage could have been cured if taken out of the line and sent to a rest camp.'¹⁵ In its final recommendations, the committee warned against the indiscriminate use of therapies based on discipline, hypnosis or re-experiencing because they might aggravate symptoms. Instead, the committee placed a strong emphasis on giving the exhausted nervous system a rest:

¹⁰ See Mark Harrison, *The Medical War: British Military Medicine in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113-14.

¹¹ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 41, 73. Harrison (*The Medical War*, 116) points out that hospitals like Craiglockhart, discussed later, were by no means typical, many shell shock patients never making it back to hospitals near base, let alone Britain.

¹² See for example Peter Howorth, 'The Treatment of Shell Shock: Cognitive Therapy Before Its Time', *Psychiatric Bulletin* 24 (2000).

¹³ W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart Hospital became well-known for his techniques for re-structuring the way the soldier viewed and interpreted past experiences. One of his wartime publications sets out his views: 'An Address on the Repression of War Experience', *Lancet*, 2 February (1918).

¹⁴ (London: HSMO, 1922); Ted Bogacz, 'War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22: The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell-Shock"', *Journal Contemporary History* 24 (1989). Southborough's report saw the condition as an excuse for a way out of the trenches. It asked for the term 'shell shock' to be banned, accepting no pathology and no notion of complex emotional breakdown. For a critique of the report see Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War*, 233-8.

¹⁵ *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into 'Shell-Shock'*, 158.

good results will be obtained in the majority by the simplest forms of psychotherapy, i.e., explanation, persuasion and suggestion, aided by such physical methods as baths, electricity and massage. Rest of mind and body is essential in all cases.¹⁶

There is nothing concrete here to emphasise the importance of quiet, but rest could only have taken place in comfortable surroundings where the senses had a chance to stand down. It is true, however, that rest and quiet could only ever be relative terms in wartime, the rest huts provided by voluntary aid organisations being a case in point. Their homely atmosphere came from the chance to enjoy a cup of tea and a biscuit, a newspaper, a gramophone record, a game, a sing-song or a religious service.¹⁷ Rest huts were in earshot of the fighting and alive with the buzz of comradeship, and yet they were intended to create a mood of relative quietude that would allow men to relax, sleep and recuperate.

When first observed, shell shock was immediately associated with intense, prolonged battle noise and the concussion of shell bursts, but the overwhelming of several senses at once might also be responsible, some argued.¹⁸ Charing Cross Hospital physician David Forsythe believed that assault by noise was part of an assemblage of stimuli from a shell blast that could contribute to shell shock:

The detonation, the flash, the heat of the explosion, the air concussion, the upheaval of the ground, and the acrid suffocating fumes combine in producing a violent assault on practically all the senses simultaneously, and the effect is often immediately intensified by the shrieks and groans and the sight of the dead and injured.¹⁹

Charles Myers first drew attention to the new battlefield injury in the leading British medical journal *The Lancet* in early 1915.²⁰ His term literally suggested the shock of experiencing a shell blast, though he later found that men who had not been subjected to shell fire could display similar symptoms. Nevertheless, for Myers, quiet rest was a logical solution. Though he would not participate in the Southborough committee enquiry (because his psychological idea that shell shock was an emotional condition that could and should be treated had not been accepted by the military authorities), the report gladly quoted his 1916 opinion that emphasised the need for a restful sonic

¹⁶ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷ Jeffrey S. Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain During the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 21-7.

¹⁸ While Winter emphasises artillery noise in the development of shell shock, Joanna Bourke offers case studies that indicate the horror of face-to-face killing and seeing one's comrades mutilated was the basis of the phenomenon. See Winter, 'Shell Shock'; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*.

¹⁹ D. Forsythe, 'Functional Nerve Disease and the Shock of Battle', *Lancet*, 25 December (1915): 1400. Forsythe also says: 'The only treatment during the acuter stage comprises three items – physical rest in bed, mental quiet, and good food.'

²⁰ C. S. Myers, 'A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock: Being an Account of Three Cases of Loss of Memory, Vision, Smell, and Taste, admitted into the Duchess of Westminster's War Hospital, Le Touquet', *Lancet*, 13 February (1915).

environment, but one that would also serve as a reminder of the duty awaiting the soldier with mild mental distress:

The centre to which these slighter shell-shock cases are first sent should be as remote from the sounds of warfare as is compatible with the preservation of the “atmosphere” of the front. It must, therefore, be neither within easy range of bombardment, nor within sight of England²¹

The Southborough report could not acknowledge that a retreat towards England would be efficacious because it did not accept the premise of shell shock as a medical condition; rather it was a sign of weakness. This retrospective analysis is in marked contrast to the guidance within the most influential nursing text of the war.²² Violetta Thurstan asserted that the most important way to deal with shell shock was ‘complete mental and physical rest in bed, so that these patients are always sent home from the front as soon as possible, right away from the scene of the war’.²³ The diversity of opinion as to the nature of shell shock meant that the provision of quiet was not obvious, nor was it easily achieved. Noise appeared to be only one of a number of triggers of a wide variety of symptoms, but quiet also seemed a common-sense part of treatment when the senses had been overwhelmed. However, some military physicians who favoured disciplinary treatment suggested that ‘some ordeal of noise’ for new recruits would help accustom them to the sound of battle and so prevent shell shock developing.²⁴ And those who had succumbed to shell shock might be given noise therapy to build them up again for the aural stress of the frontline.²⁵

Yet there were two modes of medical thinking that gave authority to quiet rest as part of the regimen required for recovery. First was the prominence of the nineteenth-century convention of the ‘rest cure’ for neurasthenia, an idea that first flourished in the USA. Neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell formalised his notion of the rest cure following study of paralysis in soldiers during the Civil War. He went on to develop his therapy in the 1870s for nervous and apparently hysterical well-to-do women. The cure entailed several weeks of bed rest, isolation and a rich milky diet.²⁶ Versions of

²¹ *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into ‘Shell-Shock’*, 124.

²² Christine Hallett, “‘This Fiendish Mode of Warfare’: Nursing the Victims of Gas Poisoning in the First World War”, in *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854-1953*, ed. Jane Brooks and Christine Hallett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 83.

²³ Violetta Thurstan, *A Text Book of War Nursing* (London: GP Putnam, 1917), 139.

²⁴ *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into ‘Shell-Shock’*, 160.

²⁵ A. G. Macdonnell remembered that those ‘who disliked noise were allotted rooms on the main road’ by Colonel Balfour-Graham, who replaced W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart Hospital. See Thomas Webb, “‘Dottyville’ – Craiglockhart War Hospital and Shell-Shock Treatment in the First World War”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99 (2006): 343. Mansell has explored the debates in WWII about building resilience to bombing noise in civilians and soldiers. He tells of one military hospital where convalescing soldiers were rehabilitated by exposing them to gramophone recordings of air raid sounds produced by the BBC: *The Age of Noise*, 171, 178.

²⁶ Michael S. Kimmel and Amy Aronson, eds, *Men and Masculinities: Volume 1* (Santa Barbara: Clio, 2004), 554. See also Anne Stiles, ‘The Rest Cure, 1873-1925’, *Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, accessed 1 August, 2017, http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=anne-stiles-the-rest-cure-1873-1925.

Mitchell's rest cure were adopted during WWI when it appeared to British physicians and neurologists that shell shock might be a kind of neurasthenic condition of the nerves. Captain Wilfred Harris recommended the rest cure in his 1915 book *Nerve Injuries and Shock*.²⁷ But for men taking time out to rest their nerves in France and Belgium, close to the frontline, the idea could seem laughable. Could rest ever be had under conditions of war? And would it really help the quivering senses of men who had been through too much already? Lieutenant Colonel John P. Silver of the Royal Army Medical Corps took it upon himself to put together a home-made magazine, *The Stoneybrook Advertiser*, for his men. One satirical advertisement he created was an offer from Silver, Balfour and Coy Chemists for a special 'Manin' (referring to the Menin Road) rest cure for the neurasthenic, either mocking the idea as an impossible luxury at the Front or suggesting that medical authorities could do little more than offer traditional pre-war treatment for bad nerves (Figure 4).²⁸ Still, Silver provides evidence from his medical perspective that the rest cure did have a place, however flawed, in shell shock relief.

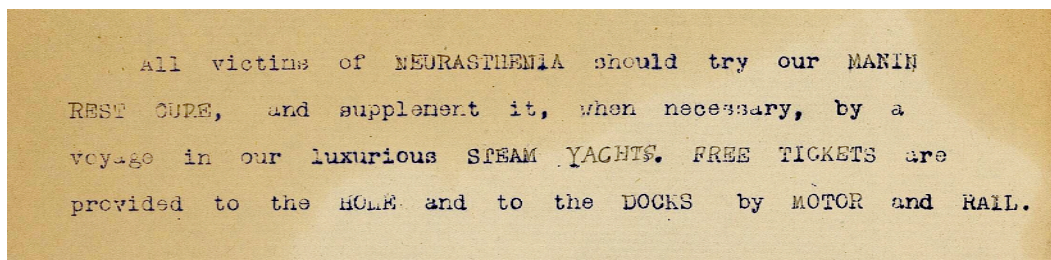


Figure 4. Excerpt from John Silver's *The Stoneybrook Advertiser* (Wellcome).

The second feature of medical thought that suggested the importance of quiet rest for convalescing soldiers was that described by Florence Nightingale. She had formalised the notion of quiet being part of the recovery regimen for wounded soldiers when she established her wards in the Crimea. Her widely-read and influential *Notes on Nursing* dedicated a chapter to the management of noise. Patients with irritable nerves should be surrounded by silence, she counselled, because no fresh air, nor no amount of careful attendance could achieve anything without quiet.²⁹ Nightingale's strong views about sonic discipline were clearly in evidence and further reinforced in

²⁷ Wilfred Harris, *Nerve Injuries and Shock*, (London: Henry Frowde, 1915).

²⁸ Papers of Lieutenant Colonel John P. Silver, Wellcome Library, Archives and Manuscripts RAMC/542/15, 'Satirical Advertisements Referring to Life on the Western Front in the First World War'. Jeffrey Reznick has analysed soldiers' cartoons about the rest cure and the fresh-air cure in hospital magazines and found similar tensions between men and authorities and the usual mocking of medical care of all kinds: *Healing the Nation*, 79-82.

²⁹ Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is and What it is Not* (Philadelphia: Stern, 1946 [1859]), 33. As well as her medical insight, Nightingale was probably reflecting societal preferences from her own elite background for quietude, along with the religious and meditative commitments she had made in her training as a deaconess.

nursing practice during WWI.³⁰ It may well be that Violetta Thurstan's advice about dispatching men away from the noise of combat reflected Nightingale's earlier theory.

These two little-discussed founding principles and practices of shell shock treatment – rest and quiet – were in fact strongly linked to natural outdoor environments where such conditions could best be found. The remainder of the chapter will substantiate this claim, but the historical basis for the peace and quiet of the countryside being associated with the resolution of nervous illness is worth considering briefly. Mitchell had a special version of his rest cure that he had designed for men, and he called it the 'West cure'. It involved cattle roping, rough riding, hunting and bonding with other men in rugged outdoor locations. Famous recipients of his cure included future US President Theodore Roosevelt, painter Thomas Eakins, poet Walt Whitman and novelist Owen Wister.³¹ Eakins recorded his West cure in a series of letters, sketches and paintings (Figure 5). His serene depictions of men in the wilderness of the Dakota Badlands show another aspect apart from the heroics of the West cure, where restful retreat and reflection within the landscape could calm the nerves and rebuild the spirit.



Figure 5. Cowboys in the Bad Lands, Thomas Eakins, 1888 (Wikimedia Commons).

³⁰ See for example, Amy Millicent Ashdown, *A Complete System of Nursing* (London: J. M. Dent, 1917).

³¹ Stiles, 'The Rest Cure'.

Another American, George Beard, who invented the popular diagnosis of neurasthenia, had argued in 1881 that ‘the moans and roar of the wind, the rustling and trembling of the leaves and swaying of the branches, the roar of the sea and of waterfalls, the singing of birds, and even the cries of some wild animals’ should be considered therapeutic for their rhythmical and melodious character.³² His ideas about this disease of ‘modern civilisation’ were influential in Britain.³³ In Britain, health benefits were attached to the salubrity of particular outdoor places, including hospital gardens. But it was the beauty of vistas, the cleanness of the air and the sunshine on the cheeks that were deemed to restore health, though the tranquillity of such places can be detected as part of the picture, especially in asylums and sanatoria.³⁴ Cheerfulness and tranquillity went together in the gardens of the Victorian asylum, Clare Hickman has argued.³⁵ Samuel Tuke’s York Retreat was carefully depicted in engravings as a bucolic haven of tranquillity. The so-called enlightened ‘moral therapy’ that Tuke pioneered drew strength and authority from the wholesomeness of the English countryside.

Capacity and capability to look after shell-shocked men developed slowly but by the end of the war fifteen hospitals were being used, though not dedicated to, the treatment of non-certified men, according to the Under Secretary of State for War, Ian Macpherson.³⁷ Little is known about what happened in these institutions but it is clear that treatment approaches varied widely between individual physicians. Many men, often non-officer class, were certified as insane and buried away in the existing asylum system.³⁸ I argue that the evidence for the place of pastoral quiet in the treatment of shell shock has been submerged by other concerns of historians. What follows are two major examples of the use of pastoral quiet during wartime and its aftermath, first in country house settings and second in a model village community.

³² George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1881), 106.

³³ For Beard, modern civilisation was the cause of the problem of nervousness, especially ‘steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women’: *ibid.*, vi. For British perspectives see Mansell, *The Age of Noise*, 25-37; Michael Neve ‘Public Views of Neurasthenia: Britain, 1880-1930’, in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter (New York: Rodopi, 2001), 141-59.

³⁴ Clare Hickman, *Therapeutic Landscapes: A History of English Hospital Gardens Since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Helen Bynum, *Spitting Blood: The History of Tuberculosis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); John Hassan, *The Seaside, Health and the Environment in England and Wales since 1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

³⁵ Clare Hickman, ‘Cheerfulness and Tranquillity: Gardens in the Victorian Asylum’, *Lancet* 1 (2014).

³⁷ ‘For Shell-Shock Cases’, *Times*, 5 November, 1918, 3.

³⁸ Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*.

Country house therapy

The British public were concerned that disabled soldiers of all kinds were looked after in a manner befitting servicemen who had risked their lives to defend the nation. Cases of court-marshalling of servicemen suspected of cowardice had attracted much concerned attention in the newspapers. Public debate called for men with shell shock to be treated away from institutional settings, particularly in vulnerable urban centres like London. London was the first stop for the wounded returning from France, and in the summer of 1916 their very large numbers were provoking reaction from the public and the authorities.³⁹ Dr Haydon, writing from his Welbeck Street clinic, wanted to see the ‘healthy suburbs’ put to use, especially the large empty houses with ‘pleasant grounds now standing idle’ in Hampstead, Golders Green and Highgate. Ordinary hospitals, he felt, would impede recovery because of the ‘mental impressions from environment’. Some of these impressions were likely to have been sonic in nature, for Haydon also vouched for the psychological healing power of music for men with shell shock.⁴⁰ The mood of the hospital environment was important. Some made efforts to lift the mood explicitly with the vitality of nature. For example, the McCaul Hospital for Officers in London experimented with a new spring colour scheme in its ward for shell-shocked soldiers. Supported by the War Office, and arguing that spring was the season of recuperation, the hospital created a sense of the outdoors in which ‘the ceiling is firmament blue, while the walls are unbroken sunlight yellow. The beds and lockers are lemon yellow. The picture rail is early spring green’.⁴¹ One can almost hear the birds singing in these descriptions that the *Daily Mail* suggested were curative.

In May 1916, this letter appeared in *The Times*:

Sir, I have a hospital for 30 sick and wounded officers. To those suffering from shell shock quiet is most necessary. They are very weak and cannot bear much movement. A stone’s-throw from the hospital is the Chelsea Physic Garden, seldom, if ever[...] entered by anyone except the gardeners. I asked the secretary of these gardens whether not more than four officers suffering from shell shock might have their chairs carried across and spend their afternoons there.⁴²

³⁹ Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Vintage, 2015), 167–8.

⁴⁰ Arthur Haydon, ‘Homes for Shell-Shock Cases’, *Daily Mail*, 29 March, 1916, 4. Little is known about the use of music in recovery for shell shock, but instances do appear in primary sources. Music and dancing were, like quietude, a common-sense way of relaxing and relieving tensions. However, these practices were underpinned by long-standing cultural and medical thinking; see Peregrine Horden, ed., *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy Since Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2000). Florence Nightingale was interested in the potential of bedside music to promote convalescence in London hospitals in the late 1890s. See Frederick Kill Harford, ‘Music in Illness’, *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 11 (2002 [1898]): 43–44.

⁴¹ ‘Cure by Spring Hues’, *Daily Mail*, 27 September, 1917, 3.

⁴² Mary E. Mitchison, ‘A Debt To The Wounded’, *Times*, 23 May, 1916, 9.

This plea for outdoor quietude by Mary Mitchison was rejected by the garden's secretary, but it provoked over 100 letters from residents of garden squares in the west of London offering them as 'rest-places' for convalescent soldiers. Messages were received from ten squares: Belgrave, Berkeley, Cambridge, Cavendish, Grosvenor, Hanover, Kensington, Manchester, Oxford and Portland.⁴³ Most of the residents of the West End Squares had joined the campaign, which became known as 'Squares for the Wounded', in time for the influx of wounded from the Somme in the late summer of 1916.⁴⁴

It seemed obvious to many that nature, even in the city, could provide the kind of peace that shell-shocked soldiers would need. This was the intuition of a public who sensed that this was the right thing to do. First, because the well-to-do and some middle-classes certainly knew this as common knowledge that their own physicians had passed on in establishing the importance of the quiet sick-room at home with a window facing the garden not the street.⁴⁵ Second, the calm of the English countryside and its villages was part of recruitment poster-depictions that the nation had created and absorbed; these images reinforced existing ideas of pastoral peace being part of national character, a precious commodity that was worth fighting for. Public opinion, in which the returning soldier should rightfully be returned to the English countryside to recover, was evident. As will become clear, officers were seen by some to be both more entitled and sensitive to such country-inspired therapeutic atmospheres, but the need for quiet for recovery was not entirely determined by class.

All wounded soldiers, shell-shocked or not, officers or ranks, deserved quiet, out of respect and as a healing medium in its own right. This tenet is vividly seen in a large sign requesting 'QUIET FOR THE WOUNDED' hung outside Charing Cross Hospital, London, in the first days of the war (Figure 6). Heavy traffic was diverted to minimise street noise. Charing Cross was not a shell shock hospital. In August 1916, the Defence of the Realm Act even made it an offence for Londoners to whistle in the time-honoured way to call a taxi at night in order to protect the rest of soldiers in hospital or elsewhere being disturbed.⁴⁶

⁴³ 'Rest Gardens For The Wounded', *Times*, 24 May, 1916, 11.

⁴⁴ White, *Zeppelin Nights*, 168.

⁴⁵ Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 66.

⁴⁶ *Defence of the Realm Manual*, 6th edition (London: HMSO, 1918), 104. See also White, *Zeppelin Nights*, 168.



Figure 6. 'Quiet for the Wounded'. Charing Cross Hospital, Agar Street, London, September 1914 (IWM).

The model of shell shock care that members of Parliament and the wider public liked best was that shaped by Lord Knutsford, hospital reformer and philanthropist. He founded six small hospitals in and around London for officers with 'nerve exhaustion and traumatic and shock neurasthenia', to spare them the indignity of certification and being sent to an asylum.⁴⁷ While these places were called hospitals, they were essentially stately homes that relied on a traditional country house aesthetic, even if they were in the capital. The first, lent by the late Lord Rendel's trustees, was opened in January 1915 at Palace Green, Kensington, with space for 35 patients accommodated in separate rooms. Lord Knutsford extolled its virtues in the *Morning Post*:

The house is quiet, "detached", overlooking Kensington Palace, with a small garden of its own. It could not be better[...] The Hospital is to be called "The Special Hospital for Officers" as we are anxious not unnecessarily to emphasise to its inmates that they are suffering from shock or nervous breakdown[.]⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Lord Knutsford, *In Black and White* (London: Edward Arnold: 1927), 268-70. Knutsford made a successful public appeal to raise £10,000 to run the Palace Green hospital for two years. See 'The Care of the Wounded', *British Journal of Nursing* 5 February (1916): 120.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 43.

Knutsford made it plain that the existing hospitals in London did not have the beds nor the facilities required of officers with nervous breakdown, not least of which was 'absolute quiet and isolation in separate wards'. His mission was to create environments that would directly address this need.⁴⁹ The atmosphere of his Special Hospital for Officers was noticed and felt to be appropriate by *The Times*:

It would not be easy to find a more sequestered and restful spot in the midst of a great city. Within sight are lofty trees, green spaces and the time mellowed brick of Kensington Palace – as much tranquil old world charm, perhaps as survives anywhere in London.⁵⁰

Two months after the Palace Green opening, demand was such that Sir Leicester Harmsworth gave his 'beautiful house, Moray Lodge, and garden on Camden Hill' for use as a similar kind of hospital. The War Office asked for more grand houses like this to be opened, resulting in the Empire Hospital in Vincent Square, Templeton House at Wimbledon and Latchmere House at Ham Common. Knutsford reported that 'Misses Alexander gave us the use of Aubrey House, and as its beautiful garden adjoined the Moray Lodge grounds nothing could have been more desirable'.⁵¹ The 20 officers convalescing there were to be 'lured back to health of body and mind by the beauty of their surrounding' in formal gardens that were among the largest in London.⁵²

While some have argued that Knutsford did not intend his hospitals to be for officers rather than men,⁵³ this became their focus and thereby reinforced existing class inequalities in relation to diagnosis and treatment.⁵⁴ The Knutsford care model could never be transposed across the social divide, but the lore of the Knutsford hospitals informed the demands of advocates of mentally disabled ex-servicemen over the next few years, who proposed similar small-scale therapeutic communities for the soldiering masses, some of which will be considered later in this chapter.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, one of the biggest shell shock hospitals for the ranks at Maghull in Liverpool may have been staffed by excellent and committed physicians, but the food was scarce, wards were dirty and the temporary huts that accommodated many men

⁴⁹ Lord Knutsford, 'Lord Knutsford's Appeal', *Times*, 13 November, 1914, 9.

⁵⁰ 'A Kensington Hospital for Officers', *Times*, 18 January, 1915, 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Aubrey House Auxiliary Hospital, Lost Hospitals of London, accessed 3 September, 2017, <http://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/aubreyhouse.html>.

⁵³ Reid, *Broken Men*, 32.

⁵⁴ The differences between the frequency of occurrence of shell shock, diagnosis and treatment in officers and ranks is still contended in relation to class, culture and medical thought. See for example Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 174; Winter, 'Shell Shock', 331. Clearer is that physicians were prone to diagnose an officer's mental collapse as neurasthenia (which, before the war, was an educated man's affliction) and to judge another rank's mental breakdown as hysteria, for which the more punitive treatments were recommended. See Bogacz, 'War Neurosis and Cultural Change', note 71. That officers might be yielding to their emotions and breaking down psychologically proved highly embarrassing to the authorities. See Richards, 'The British Response to Shell-Shock', iii.

⁵⁵ Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 43-4.

were 'a disgrace'.⁵⁶ It seems there were no outdoor routines and certainly no tranquil gardens to relax in.⁵⁷

True quiet found in the countryside

A marked anti-urban tenor to the debate about shell shock recovery was evident in public debate and in advice from medical authorities. Some argued that shell-shocked men should not be treated in London at all, where the threat of air-raids was ever present. The chaplain of one of the large military hospitals wanted to see men moved to the 'quiet and fresh air of the country' to be able to rest their nerves.⁵⁸ Men with shell shock were especially disturbed by the possibility and occurrence of air-raids and were best kept out of London in order to be able to recover properly, wrote playwright Seymour Hicks from the smoky calm of the Garrick Club.⁵⁹ When the Duke of Sutherland launched an appeal for country houses suitable to be used as hospitals or convalescent homes, he was overwhelmed with offers. Almost immediately 250 country houses, manors and halls were put forward, though few were found to be suitable.⁶⁰

The idea that the genteel connection to rural life would be beneficial was given some authority in 1917. Thomas Lumsden, a doctor and medical referee for pensions, developed a scheme for discharged, pensioned men who were still suffering mental ill health. Lumsden wanted these men to be 'sent to live at a country gentleman's house, or with a farmer or gardener, where he would be well fed, and be encouraged to perform a small but increasing amount of simple work, under absolutely safe conditions, in the open air, and with a peaceful, natural environment.'⁶¹ A week after promoting his plan in *The Times* he was inundated with offers of hospitality for pensioned servicemen and his project took off.⁶² This kind of country environment was not to be offered to 'mild shell-shock cases' though, a conference of neurologists had decided at the War Office, but the Ministry of Pensions would support Lumsden's Country Host scheme for men who were not returning to fight.⁶³ There may well have been concerns that retreat to the countryside would create conditions that were not conducive to return to duty.

⁵⁶ Reid, *Broken Men*, 33.

⁵⁷ Edgar Jones, 'Shell Shock at Maghull and the Maudsley: Models of Psychological Medicine in the UK', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 65 (2010).

⁵⁸ 'Shell-Shock Men', *Daily Mail*, 8 November, 1917, 5.

⁵⁹ Seymour Hicks, 'Shell-Shock Cases in Air Raids', *Daily Mail*, 27 December, 1917, 2.

⁶⁰ Dakers, *The Countryside at War*, 36.

⁶¹ Thomas Lumsden, 'Nerve-Shattered Pensioners', *Times*, 22 August, 1917, 9.

⁶² Thomas Lumsden, 'Nerve-Shattered Pensioners', *Times*, 27 August, 1917, 8.

⁶³ 'Country Air for Shell-Shock', *Daily Mail*, 26 November, 1917, 5; 'Disabled Soldiers In Civil Hospitals', *Times*, 23 January, 1918, 3. The *British Medical Journal* covered Lumsden's Country Host scheme too.

The quarterly journal *Reveille*, billed as the first journal devoted to the ‘care, re-education, and return to civil life of disabled soldiers and sailors’, showed a marked affinity for the quietude of the English pastoral as a counter to the damage brought by industrial life and warfare.⁶⁴ *Reveille*, launched in August 1918, was given weight and officialdom by its HMSO imprint, yet under the editorship of John Galsworthy, an established novelist and playwright who started work on his *Forsyte Saga* during this period, it incorporated much writing of pastoral persuasion. With articles of official views from the War Office and Ministry of Pensions, together with opinions from writers at the Front, medical and military men, and punctuated by literary contributions, it is hard to imagine who would have read such a publication. Pieces about shell shock recovery sit alongside those about orthopaedic centres, living with deafness and training of physically disabled men for work on the land. On one hand, Galsworthy wanted to restore the ‘spirit no less than the body’ of the shell-shocked and their carers.⁶⁵ On the other, he seemed intent on persuading officialdom, which he hated, to immerse damaged men in the balm of the English countryside. That a man like Galsworthy, who could not accept the idea of a twentieth-century, urban, industrial England,⁶⁶ was put in charge of *the* journal about the recovery of mental and physical function after war service is telling. His sentimentalism and nostalgia were given free rein in the cause of helping to heal the nation’s disabled veterans. His views echoed something deeply-held in the national mind. Drawing upon the springtime vitality of burgeoning nature Galsworthy offers the following sensory tonic to the disabled soldier:

Every tree is dowered with young beauty, and no two the same. Last evening they stood against the sunset, magical and delicate, with pale gold light between the curling quiet leaves; far away on the skyline some elms had their topsails set; the birds had lost their senses, singing. In such moments this green Land of ours has incomparable beauty, seeming to promise happiness which can satisfy even the human heart. The thoughts of wounds, of disfigurement, and blindness, of lost limbs, twisted limbs, the thousand and one bodily disasters which this war has brought, becomes unbearable unless we keep the hope and the will to give back to the wounded something of this Spring and of the Summer which Spring leads to.⁶⁷

There is, in this picture, the sights, sounds and smells of nature’s awakening. But could men benefit from such things? Galsworthy insists that British industry cannot sustain nor heal the crippled child or soldier where the ‘wheels go round and lights flare and streets reek, and no larks sing, save some little blinded victim in a cage’.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ John Galsworthy, ‘The Gist of the Matter’, *Reveille*, 1 August (1918): 3.

⁶⁶ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn Of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 63.

⁶⁷ Galsworthy, ‘The Gist of the Matter’, 4-5.

⁶⁸ John Galsworthy, ‘Heritage: An Impression’, *Reveille*, 1 November (1918): 305.

Instead he evokes a 'heritage' of 'print frocks and children's faces, of flowers and nightingales, under the lee of a group of pines, the only dark beauty in the long sunlight'.⁶⁹ Galsworthy publishes an extraordinary photograph of a beaming convalescent soldier, charming and charmed by white doves of peace (Figure 7). The nameless 'Happy Warrior' is in the courtyard of the Old Heritage Craft Schools, Chailey, Sussex, and captioned with 'Laetus sorte meâ' (Happy in my lot). The message is that this damaged man – we know his left arm is wounded, his mind may be too – was being cured through this intimate communication with the soft and gentle nature of a pre-industrial England.



Figure 7. 'The Happy Warrior', *Reveille*, 1 August (1918): 105.

'The towns have got us – nearly all', argued Galsworthy. 'Not until we let beauty and the quiet voice of the fields, and the scent of clover creep again into our nerves, shall we begin to build Jerusalem and learn peacefulness once more.' He continues, settling on the contributions of nature's sounds: 'And life should have its covering of dream – bird's flight, bird's song, wind in the ash trees and the corn, tall lilies glistening, the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

evening shadows slanting out, the night murmuring of waters.⁷⁰ To find such descriptions in *Reveille* reveals the continuing authority of pastoral thinking, not only as a trope of national identity, but as a milieu in which to restore the strength after warfare. Pastoral sounds were soft, gentle and restorative.

More prosaic, in comparison, was the use of health spas as centres for the treatment of shell shock. Craiglockhart hospital just outside Edinburgh has been made famous for its poet patients, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, and W. H. R. River's psychotherapeutic techniques, featured in Pat Barker's novels. Here I want to draw attention to its function as a spa; such places were part of a system of care that drew upon proximity to nature. Craiglockhart had been since 1880 a hydropathic hotel for Edinburgh's worried wealthy. A 1903 promotional brochure expounded its lush and peaceful surroundings:

The Establishment affords to its residents all the amenities and retirement of quiet country life [...] The gardens extending to about twelve acres have been tastefully laid out with lawn, shrubberies and ornamental plantation, interspersed with agreeable walks leading to various points which command the finest views of the City and surrounding scenery, and there are also courts for Lawn-tennis and Croquet, with Archery-grounds and Bowling greens.⁷¹

This underlines the source of quietude at Craiglockhart – it emanates from gardens and greenery, and no vista can exist without its peace. As a shell shock hospital, some patients found the quiet routines that doctors prescribed too much. Lieutenant James Butlin, who served in the Yorkshire and Dorsetshire Regiments, found that “a complete and glorious loaf” palls after a few days; ‘Doing a little gardening and poultry farming after breakfast’ with ‘fretwork and photography after lunch’ followed by ‘viewing natural scenery after tea’.⁷² We know Butlin was getting bored but he doesn't say anything about his mental state beyond this. Perhaps the medicine was working, but during wartime it felt incongruous. However, in the hospital magazine, *The Hydra*, one patient signing himself as North British offered these verses, entitled ‘Be Still, My Soul’:

Be still, my soul, and sound
The stillness all around:
Brings peace to wearied souls,
‘Tis Nature's Paradise.

⁷⁰ Galsworthy, ‘Heritage: An Impression’, 303.

⁷¹ History of Craiglockhart, War Poets Collection at Edinburgh Napier University, accessed 3 September, 2017, <http://www2.napier.ac.uk/warpoets/1800.htm#1800>.

⁷² Private papers of Lieutenant J. H. Butlin, letters sent from Craiglockhart Hospital to Basil Burnett Hall between May and July 1917, Imperial War Museum (IWM), catalogue number 7915.

Be still, my soul, and rest,
 The peace that was your quest
 Is here, in this demesne:
 'Tis Nature's Paradise.

Be still, my soul, and sleep,
 Refreshing, good, and deep:
 And waking you will say
 'Tis Nature's Paradise.

Be still, my soul, delight
 In all the joys that might
 Be yours, whilst you remain
 In Nature's Paradise.⁷³

This poem makes plain that nature was the true source of quiet for this soldier. Refreshing rest and sleep could happen in this natural peacefulness. His soul could be still, as perhaps could the turbulence of the mind. A spa hospital like Craiglockhart could offer this in ways that conventional hospitals and asylums definitively could not.⁷⁴

The 'beneficent alluring quietude' of the Village Centre utopia

As I have argued, the idea of country house therapy for shell-shocked soldiers was rooted in the perceived efficacy of the rural scene. It was the aesthetics of the gardens and grounds of these kinds of places that were considered to be special, not the gracefulness of the architecture. However, the most important example of post-war quiet rural rest for neurasthenic soldiers concerned not a house but a whole community. It evolved around the nineteenth-century concept of the model village and was a centre-piece in the imagining of a nation without war and recovering from it. It was part of a pastoral image that signified peace.⁷⁵ When Ivor Gurney wrote that men had been persuaded to fight partly 'in order to preserve and somehow possess the beauties of the English countryside',⁷⁶ he was pointing towards the recruitment posters that showed exactly what was being fought for (Figure 8). These posters also vouched for what men would return to, once the war was won, even if few knew such scenes, and it therefore becomes necessary to address beliefs about the healing

⁷³ *The Hydra*, 21 July, 1917, 9. Oxford University's First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed 20 July, 2016, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/3133/1912>. The views of shell-shocked men are few and far between and the home-made hospital magazine *The Hydra* gives evidence in poems, stories and drawings of a longing and fondness for the imagined pastoral, an escape from the hauntings of the trenches and a vision of the nation at peace that the surroundings at Craiglockhart may well have nurtured. The thoughtful and gentle ways of Rivers were not the only ways at Craiglockhart, however. Colonel Balfour-Graham who replaced Rivers favoured unsympathetic and disciplinary regimes that could involve toughening-up by exposure to noise.

⁷⁴ See Humphries and Kurchinski, 'Rest, Relax and Get Well', about the Canadian military-medical authorities' use of spas in Kent and Derbyshire.

⁷⁵ Fussell has suggested that the opposite of experiencing war is proposing moments of pastoral: *The Great War*, 231.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 52.

embrace of the countryside and its village communities that can be found in thinking about how to restore men damaged by war. In this case study it will be necessary to read-between-the-lines for the sonic, which is often implied and taken for granted. But only by a consideration of the whole environment can the sonic be understood.

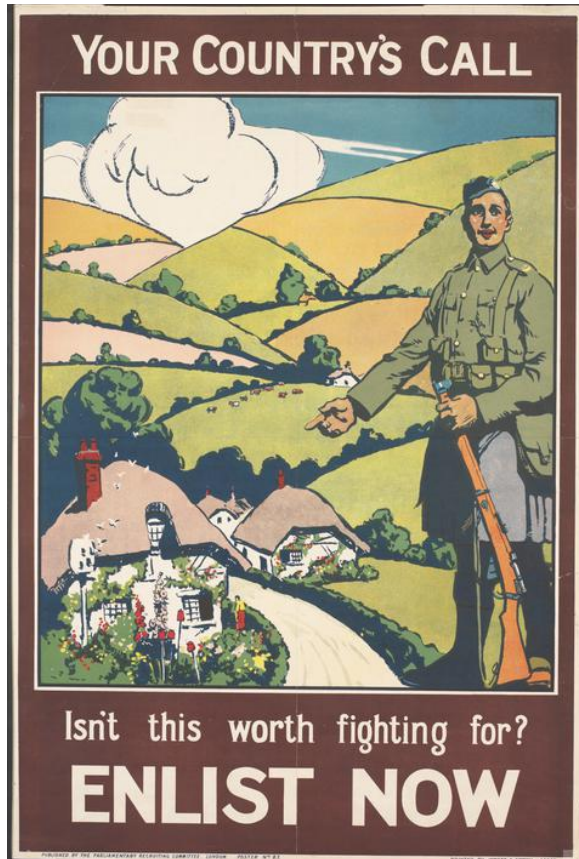


Figure 8. 'Your Country's Call'. A Parliamentary Recruiting Committee poster, 1915 (IWM).

Enham Village Centre

The Enham Village Centre in the Hampshire countryside was a particularly interesting response to the need to rehabilitate shell-shocked men. Historians have not yet explored the phenomenon of post-war Village Centres, although a sister project called the Papworth Village Settlement in Cambridgeshire, established in 1917 for families with tuberculosis to live and work in, was discussed in 1984.⁷⁷ The consumptive was believed to benefit from 'a return to Nature' so long as he or she obeyed nature's laws.⁷⁸ The vision for Village Centres was formulated during early 1918 when there was much uncertainty about the proper provision for disabled soldiers by the state

⁷⁷ Linda Bryder, 'Papworth Village Settlement – a Unique Experiment in the Treatment and Care of the Tuberculosis?', *Medical History* 28 (1984). There were many common features with the Village Centre idea, such as attention to the whole person, treatment with fresh air and craft work, and the establishment of a permanent community where emphasis was placed on the happy family for health.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

and the treatment of shell shock was a continuing political and medical concern. A driving motive for the establishment of Enham Village Centre was the desire by men like the lunacy reformer Sir Frederick Milner to prevent soldiers with shell shock, especially rank-and-file men, from being incarcerated in asylums.⁷⁹ He campaigned widely around Britain to raise funds for the 'only private Organisation undertaking the work of helping these men to help themselves'.⁸⁰

The Village Centre offered help to all disabled servicemen but it was understood that neurasthenic cases would form a large part of the intake.⁸¹ This was to be a place where medical rehabilitation was on offer, combined with gentle outdoor or craft work, and a distinctly non-institutional environment.⁸² The medical director Fortescue Fox was interested in a holistic treatment underpinned by a 'busy, happy community, with the right atmosphere and social life'.⁸³ Warwick Draper, speaking for the Village Centres Committee, spelt out the kind of atmosphere that would be required: 'cheerful and tranquil out-of-door surroundings' and a 'quiet healthy environment'.⁸⁴ This kind of sonic milieu would facilitate a treatment routine that would focus essentially on the well-known rest cure interventions of 'wholesome food' with 'massage, electricity and baths'.⁸⁵ This was not conceived as a health spa, however. Gentle 'graded work' would have its own rehabilitative effects so long as it was not of an industrial kind that reflected the 'speeding up' of the factory system.⁸⁶ The offer of pastoral quiet was explicitly part of a plan to ensure that neurasthenic men regained their capacity for work, retraining in new skills, to become independent and productive, and not a drain on the nation and its pensions. Yet one can also suggest that the slow pace of this traditional rural work allowed the senses to relax, nature's sounds and atmosphere to be re-encountered, and the mind to gradually recalibrate.⁸⁷

Careful attention was paid to the selection of a special health-giving location for Enham Village Centre. Flat or damp country would not work. The best results would

⁷⁹ Frederick Milner's Eden Manor promotional booklet, The Ex-Services Welfare Society, National Archives, Kew, reference PIN 15/2499. Milner was a founder in 1919 of the Ex-Services Welfare Society and led the opening of a rehabilitative home called Eden Manor in 1924 for shell-shocked soldiers. The Society argued that Eden Manor was distinguished by peaceful and picturesque surroundings, very different to the pauper asylums they claimed had absorbed thousands of shell-shocked men. See Reid, *Broken Men*, 100-62; Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 293-9.

⁸⁰ Frederick Milner, letter, *John O'Groat Journal*, 14 October, 1921, 3.

⁸¹ Village Centres Council Annual Report, 1919, Enham Village Centre archive reference EAA/1/3/1/1/2, 18-20.

⁸² Warwick Draper, 'Village Centres for Cure and Training', *Recalled to Life* 21 April (1918): 346.

⁸³ Fortescue Fox, 'Village Centres', *Reveille*, 1 February (1919): 465.

⁸⁴ Draper, 'Village Centres for Cure and Training', 345-6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁸⁷ Stephen Kern has pointed out that the idea of modernity, including warfare, has been associated with an increase in pace and irregularities of rhythm: *The Culture of Time and Space*, 109-30.

come from surroundings of 'natural beauty and tranquillity'.⁸⁸ These characteristics seem inseparable; natural beauty seems unlikely to be perceived without an attendant peacefulness. Both are associated by Warwick Draper with health and healing. The Centre boasted 1,000 acres of countryside, including 150 acres of woodland.⁸⁹ Its promotional material, that sought to attract financial support, depicted via an aerial photograph the grand Enham Hall and its cottages in splendid rural isolation, and an icon of pastoral peace, a flock of Hampshire Down sheep, had its own page.⁹⁰ The *British Medical Journal* featured the opening and commented that the estate was 'situated in a healthy part of Hampshire, with three hamlets upon it, five farms, a post office, village hall, cottages and smithy'.⁹¹ Such imagery conjured up not a pre-war but a pre-industrial England, where time moved slowly. It also called to mind a time when the national soundscape was pure and simple, and paced by the human not the machine. Stanley Baldwin employed this mythic past in 1924 when he talked about England being the country and the country being England. England came to him through his senses: 'the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone'.⁹² Baldwin went further to associate these responses with 'the very depths of our nature', going back to 'the beginning of time and the human race'.⁹³ Enham emerged from ideas like these, that such a place had a spirituality and purity which were an essential part of a long story of English country heritage where the days moved gently and slowly.

When it was opened in May 1919 by the Minister of Pensions, Enham took 50 neurasthenic patients. Rest cure therapies were complemented by work involving the craft rhythms and repetitions of carpentry, basket making, upholstery and electrical fitting. Horticulture and farm work were light: planting seedlings, hedge clipping and fruit picking.⁹⁴ Men were occupied by making, growing and nurturing. Many of these activities have to do with regeneration, and working outdoors within nature was certainly seen to have its own regenerative powers. The notion of the 'land cure' as it was called was not simply about ideas of moral value in work and restoring men to economic utility. Damaged human bodies and spirits might be able to regenerate

⁸⁸ Draper, 'Village Centres for Cure and Training', 347.

⁸⁹ Enham Village Centre promotional brochure, IWM archive, catalogue number K.91/2253, 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid. In 1935 the pastoral imagery is still very prominent. See Village Centres Council Annual Report, 1935, IWM archive, catalogue number KS.84/55.

⁹¹ 'The Opening of Enham Village Centre', *British Medical Journal* 8 November (1919): 610.

⁹² This was part of Baldwin's speech to the 6 May, 1924, meeting of the Royal Society of St George, reported in 'English Traits. Mr Baldwin's Review', *Times*, 7 May, 1924, 16. See Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', 105. For a discussion of the links between Conservatism and rurality see Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 104-6.

⁹³ Quoted in Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', 105.

⁹⁴ Village Centres Council Annual Report, 1920, Enham Village Centre archive reference EAA/1/3/1/1/2. These features were reported in the medical press, for example 'The Enham Village Centre for the Re-education of Men Disabled in the War', *Lancet*, 9 August (1919): 252.

themselves all the better in proximity to English soil and its green shoots.⁹⁵ John Hargrave, who went on to found the Kibbo Kift movement in 1920, argued after his Medical Corps experiences that only by reconnecting with the ‘fresh air’ of nature could civilisation recoup its lost vital energy.⁹⁶

We only know how men responded to the Enham system of care from official reports; there are no known accounts from individuals. The 1921 Annual Report claimed that 75% of men had been restored to health. Many would have left to live and work elsewhere, but Field Marshall Douglas Haig emphasised the need for a permanent community in his statement that ‘there are a large number of men so badly injured by war service that they will never be able to return to the ranks of the industrial world’.⁹⁷ At this point, there were 25-30 men living with their wives and children, a model Haig saw as the future for Enham. The crash and pace of industry, would be unbearable to neurasthenic men. Major C. Reginald Harding made the case for therapeutic quiet provided by outdoor work in nature for those ‘who suffer from nervous and mental shock and exhaustion’. He argued that ‘these above all need the restful and healing influence of quiet places and occupations in the open air and mental treatment of the right kind’.⁹⁸ Harding as well as Haig believed the Village Centre idea would have a permanent place in Britain because it chimed with the revival of village and rural life that was in the air in the aftermath of war. ‘We know that the war has turned men’s minds towards a country life’, Harding wrote.⁹⁹

It was not an altogether backward-looking idea, if integrating nature within new communities was part of a plan to create progressive and pleasant ways of living. The influence of Ebenezer Howard’s garden city ideas, published in 1898 under the name *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, are evident. His vision, like the Village Centre idea, was rooted in a comforting conservative English past that might counteract the filth and unhealthiness of industrial cities.¹⁰⁰ Most important of all was for garden cities to reduce the alienation of human society from nature –

⁹⁵ Experience from France, where wounds had been proven to heal better in conditions of open-air agricultural work than in hospital, informed Village Centre planning. See “Primitive Agents in Treatment”, *Lancet*, 21 December (1918): 852.

⁹⁶ John Hargrave, *The Great War Brings It Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence* (London: Constable, 1919), x-xvi.

⁹⁷ Letter from Field Marshall Haig, inside front cover of Village Centres Council Annual Report, 1921, Enham Village Centre archive reference EAA/1/3/1/1/3.

⁹⁸ Major C. Reginald Harding, ‘Land Settlement and the Disabled’, *Reveille*, 1 February (1919): 467.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 471.

¹⁰⁰ Brett Clark, ‘Ebenezer Howard and the Marriage of Town and Country’, *Archives of Organizational and Environmental Literature* 16 (2003).

accessed through an abundance of parks and open spaces – to promote an ecological system of balance between city and country.¹⁰¹ The first garden city, Letchworth, was successfully established before the war and the second in Welwyn immediately after.¹⁰² Howard in turn had been taken by William Morris' socialist pastoral utopian story *News From Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest* (1890).¹⁰³ Deeply romantic, Morris' story was a retreat to the Middle Ages, powered by an unbroken pageant of haymaking, dancing and handicrafts. Morris believed in a new society that could live and work in harmony with nature, which would bring hope and escape from discontentment and change.¹⁰⁴ Morris saw the growing appeal of 'rest' as a social ideal of many of the English middle classes, whether they professed conservatism or radicalism.¹⁰⁵ It was an alternative to the pervasive industrial spirit that had concerned so many. In all of these utopias of living close to nature was an interest in aesthetics, perhaps even as much as social considerations.¹⁰⁶ Implicit in the aesthetics of building new model communities was the pastoral sonic.



Figure 9. Front cover of the 1923 annual report of the Enham Village Centre.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 87, 93.

¹⁰² Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁰³ Clark, 'Ebenezer Howard', 89.

¹⁰⁴ William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin Classics, 1993 [1890]), xxviii.

¹⁰⁵ Wiener, *English Culture*, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 58-63.

In Enham Village Centre, then, we see faith placed in the peace and quiet of the countryside as a reliable and tested way to rebalance minds. The traditional rhythms of making things out of wicker and wood, picking fruit, and cultivating the land without machinery brought veterans back into a natural synchrony with age-old practices, while providing a simple soundscape of known and reassuring clicks and swishes (Figure 9 and 10).¹⁰⁷ We have a limited vocabulary for such small sounds of human interaction with nature, but I suggest that they are part of a mood of quietude that appeared to have particular therapeutic purpose after the alien disjunctions of trench experience. Visitors to Enham were sensitive to the charms of its environment. Though there were 30 acres of gardens devoted to fruit growing, flowers and market gardens, *Fruit Grower* magazine managed to locate something even more important about the place to recovering soldiers: ‘above and beyond all, there is an atmosphere, an elusive something, that has nothing to do with the pure air of the countryside, but is composed of a beneficent alluring quietude infused into the centre from the serene spirituality of those whose faith made Enham possible and actual.’¹⁰⁸ In other words, the healing quietude emanated from the careful good intentions of the founders of Enham and its staff, as well as the pleasant rurality of its geography.

There is some evidence to suggest that interest in the sonic environment at the Centre extended beyond the provision of quiet. Another visitor in 1919 found that there were music and singing lessons at Enham, which were intended to reanimate stammering lips.¹⁰⁹ This ‘vocal therapy’ was a scheme devised for neurasthenic convalescents by psychologist Sir Bryan Donkin. The emphasis was on ‘voice production, deep breathing and aural training’, as well as singing.¹¹⁰ Frederick Mott, who ran the neurological section at Maudsley Hospital during the war, was a supporter of vocal therapy work, himself a founding member of the Society of English Singers.¹¹¹ He reported that singing classes, under the direction of instructors, had been especially successful in convalescent camps in France and England during the war.¹¹² It is intriguing to see *The Times* printing a piece in 1918 called ‘Folk Dances for Shell Shock’ which announced the revival of ‘old English folk’ dance classes at the Front. Tuition was ‘imparted to our men by a band of instructresses’, the article revealed, and organised by Lena Ashwell, who was well-known for putting on large-scale concerts for troops. Her musical programmes were not usually set around the pastoral theme of

¹⁰⁷ These rhythms provided the chance for men to entrain with their environment. See Clayton, ‘In Time with the Music’, 5-7.

¹⁰⁸ ‘A Rural Life for Health and Restoration’, *Fruit Grower*, 29 January, 1920, 187.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Singing Sick Men to Health. Miracles of Vocal Therapy’, *Daily Graphic*, 19 July, 1922, 5.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Vocal Therapy Fund’, *British Journal of Nursing*, 12 July (1919): 22.

¹¹¹ Edgar Jones, “‘An Atmosphere of Cure’: Frederick Mott, Shell Shock and the Maudsley”, *History of Psychiatry* 25 (2014): 416.

¹¹² Frederick W. Mott, *War Neuroses and Shell Shock* (London: Oxford University Press, 1919), 297.

folk dancing, but she had witnessed music in hospitals at the Front to be therapeutic as well as pleasurable: 'It seems to break the spell that the horrors and the deafening noise of modern military warfare lays on the nerves of so many men. The good it does is permanent. There have been cases when the music has bought back memory to a man who had completely lost it, and speech to another struck dumb'.¹¹³ What was happening at Enham was part of broader thinking that sound environments could help revive damaged men, at times bringing back their own lost communicative faculties.



Figure 10. Basket making at Enham Village Centre (*Village Centres Council Annual Report*, 1923, 15).

By 1922, after four years of work, 725 patients had been treated at Enham. At that time there were 103 men resident at the centre, 46 'were suffering from neurasthenia' and 35 from surgical conditions many of which were gunshot wounds to the head.¹¹⁴ The remainder had presumably improved sufficiently to be discharged. However, the vision of building a healthy and prosperous post-war rural society with the guardianship of nature's calming caresses did indeed transpire. The 1935 annual report underlined the continued focus on establishing a permanent settlement. By then some 400 men and their families were living and working in the village, in 62

¹¹³ Lucinda Moore, 'Music and Morale: Lena Ashwell and the Healing Power of Concerts at the Front', 18 July, 2014, accessed 6 April, 2017, <http://blog.maryevans.com/2014/07/music-morale-lena-ashwell-and-the-healing-power-of-concerts-at-the-front.html>.

¹¹⁴ Major G. V. Stockdale, medical officer, the *Village Centres Annual Report*, 1923, 8. It is important to remember that men with physical wounds were rarely given a diagnosis of neurasthenia, as if physical wounds had no other consequences, and physical and psychiatric problems could not co-exist. See Winter, 'Shell Shock', 331-2.

‘memorial cottages’. Cottage building was funded by the Prince of Wales, Princess Mary and the British Legion. Selling basketry, furniture and farm produce had become a commercial operation.¹¹⁵

Enham was not the only example of the use of pastoral peace and quiet to help men recover after the war. The War Office established Seale-Hayne neurological hospital in Devon, in a former agricultural college, because it was ‘ideally situated’ and ‘admirably adapted’ to support the Royal Victoria Hospital, whose psychiatric unit of ‘neurasthenic cases’ was overwhelmed.¹¹⁶ The physician in charge, Major Arthur Hurst, took on rank-and-file men, some of whom were previously deemed incurable, with the intention of ‘rapid cure’ and return to the Front.¹¹⁷ This was not a community like Enham but a system of persuasive treatment that culminated in a period of ‘open-air employment’, which included farm work, gardening and handicrafts in ‘beautiful surroundings’.¹¹⁸ Could these beautiful surroundings be named as such without the striking presence of peace and quiet contributing to this beauty? Certainly, for Hurst, the absence of the stress of air-raids at Seale-Hayne was an essential constituent.¹¹⁹

What Hurst provides is a kind of West cure, of the type that Silas Weir Mitchell had described, though one that appears to be far less masculine in the activities given to recovering men. Uniquely, Hurst documented his results on film in 1917 and 1918, showing the symptoms and resolution of severe hysterical gaits, paralyses, tics and speech disorders.¹²⁰ But the film also highlights through a series of pastoral scenes ‘on the farm’ the functionality of men thriving productively after a month or two of treatment. We see Private King and Private Sandall leading a bull through a meadow and digging a field. Private Read’s swaying hysterical gait and nose-wiping tic have vanished and now he is shown feeding chickens on Seale-Hayne farm. There is a group picking blackberries and two men at work in the fields with horse-drawn ploughs (Figure 11).¹²¹ The film is not intended to show the transformation to post-war productivity of ex-servicemen, but that gentle pastoral routines and rhythms are the last phase in the treatment of war neurosis before men are sent back to battle, and

¹¹⁵ Village Centres Council Annual Report, 1935, IWM archive, catalogue number KS.84/55.

¹¹⁶ Colonel Henry Davy, quoted in Melanie Dunn, ‘Hysterical War Neuroses: A Study of Seale-Hayne Neurological Military Hospital, Newton Abbot, 1918-1919’ (MA diss., University of Exeter, 2009), 16.

¹¹⁷ Hurst intended to minimise pension claims as part of his treatment plan. See A. F. Hurst and J. L. M. Symns, ‘The Rapid Cure of Hysterical Symptoms in Soldiers’, *Lancet* 2, 6 August (1918): 140.

¹¹⁸ Arthur Hurst, quoted in Dunn, ‘Hysterical War Neuroses’, 18.

¹¹⁹ Hurst and Symns, ‘The Rapid Cure of Hysterical Symptoms’, 140.

¹²⁰ *War Neurosis: Netley Hospital, 1917*, accessed 3 September, 2017, <http://wellcomelibrary.org/player/b16678643#?asi=0&ai=0>. See A. F. Hurst, ‘Cinematograph Demonstration of War Neuroses’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 11 (1918). For a critical appraisal of Hurst’s film evidence of his cures see Wendy Holden, *Shell Shock: The Psychological Impact of War* (London: Channel 4 Books, 1998), 19.

¹²¹ The most detailed analysis of Hurst’s films of his treatment successes makes no mention of these prominent scenes. Edgar Jones, ‘War Neuroses and Arthur Hurst: A Pioneering Medical Film about the Treatment of Psychiatric Battle Casualties’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67 (2012).

that functionality on the land is indicative of readiness to return to fight. How long men survived on active service, having demonstrated their blackberrying abilities, is not known, though Hurst claimed this kind of treatment reduced the likelihood of relapse.¹²²



Figure 11. Stills from the film *War Neurosis at Seale-Hayne hospital, 1917* (Wellcome).

I have argued that the land was seen to hold quite specific healing powers and that its quietude was a vital, though often unspoken, part of its character for both officers and men. There was something of an agrarian fantasy in some of the propositions that disabled soldiers were imagined to need: ‘A small holding, with additional income provided by bee-keeping, poultry, and rabbits, would support a man and his family in health and comfort’.¹²³ The concept of quiet land cure was quite serious, however. Nobody better illustrates this than Colonel Sir John Collie MD, who, as President of the Special Medical Board for Neurasthenia and Allied Nervous Diseases, and Director of Institutions for Neurasthenia, was in charge of defending the ministry from the potential tide of pension claims from disabled ex-soldiers.¹²⁴ A key way to reduce claims was to keep men occupied outdoors where ‘a healthy and invigorating environment is everything’, Collie argued. He had persuaded the Ministry of Pensions that gardening was the most useful activity for the neurasthenic.¹²⁵ Collie was a sponsor and champion of the Red Cross Homes of Recovery, the first of which was in Highfield, Golders Green, in a disused girls’ school, ‘in a beautiful position on the outskirts of London’ with ‘twelve and a half acres of garden’.¹²⁶ The best way to minimise claims was to heal men, or for them to heal themselves, in the peace and

¹²² Hurst and Symns, ‘The Rapid Cure of Hysterical Symptoms’, 140.

¹²³ ‘The Return of the Officer’, *Reveille*, Issue 1 (1918): 86. This article indicated that many believed that only open-air work was suitable for soldiers with mental distress.

¹²⁴ For Collie’s approach to pension distribution see Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 109–10.

¹²⁵ John Collie, ‘The Management of Neurasthenia and Allied Disorders, Contracted in the Army’, *Recalled to Life*, September (1917): 242, 248.

¹²⁶ Statement of Accounts, First Report of the Joint Council of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England and the British Red Cross Society, 4 September, 1919 to 31 March, 1921, 241.

quiet of country work and gardening. Nowhere does Collie speak explicitly about quietude, but it hovers in the air of all his plans.

The status of quiet in national recovery

After the war, most ex-servicemen required ‘a period of quietness, a second adolescence as it were, to shed the past and get back into life at a lower key than they were used to’, historian Denis Winter has argued.¹²⁷ Some withdrew into solitude or nomadism, while others turned to petty crime or angry demands from society for recompense. There were few jobs about, but in any case a return to former employment might be delayed because men needed time to find their feet and were happy for their country to keep them for a while.¹²⁸ Yet in the difficult period of readjustment, which often took many years, simple, relaxing routines were often the most typical. Winter’s father had fought and wrote in his unpublished memoir: ‘I was on the dole right through the summer, revelling in the open-air swimming pool of Victoria Park, reading in Hackney Library, rowing on the Lea, assiduously practising the violin. The springs were unwinding’.¹²⁹ There was, it was suggested, a new kind of hushed atmosphere in the years after the war was over. In October 1919, Robert Graves found Oxford University ‘remarkably quiet’. The expected boisterous behaviour of the old days was muted in both returning soldiers and in new boys straight from public school.¹³⁰

We know from Chapter 1 that the war changed soldier’s listening practices and that the meanings of sounds had been altered by experience. Loud noises, the sound of birdsong and gaps in sound – the silences – could all be read differently now. Back in Britain, even after the war had ended, these changes extended into the private and public life of many civilian veterans, their families and others who had remained at home. New sensibilities were brought home, though how persistent these changes may have been in peacetime, in civilian life, is hard to say. It is clear, however, that a community far larger than the returning fighting forces had been engaged in new ways of listening for danger, its passing and presumably its opposites. For example, civilians in the south-east of England found the insistent throbbing of the guns across the Channel, ‘like the thud of some giant propeller’, invaded walks in the countryside, penetrated inside homes and reminded families of their loved ones under fire.¹³¹ For

¹²⁷ Denis Winter, *Death’s Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1979), 244.

¹²⁸ Philip Gibbs, *Now it Can be Told* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920), 548.

¹²⁹ J. Winter quoted in Winter, *Death’s Men*, 243.

¹³⁰ Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 238.

¹³¹ Dakers, *The Countryside at War*, 112.

Sassoon on leave at his family home in the summer of 1917 there was no escape: 'I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns', he wrote.¹³² Despite poet Mary Beazley's efforts to get away from the sound, she still thought she could hear the guns 'in the splash of a wave' and 'the sea-birds' call'.¹³³

Civilians in many urban areas of Britain and in towns along the south and east coasts of England had cultivated ways of 'listening out' for airship raids from late 1914. For their own safety and as a civic obligation, civilians were asked by authorities to listen out for all kinds of new warning sounds, from 'buzzers' to 'hooters' and 'syrens'.¹³⁴ However, in London, by-and-large, little sonic warning was given, especially at night-time. It was left to Londoners to listen in the dark for themselves and by 1917 bombing raids by Gotha and Giant aircraft as well as Zeppelin airships were proving fatal and causing much fear.¹³⁵ 'The Gotha hum' – 'quite unlike any other machine noise' – was a sound strongly associated with trepidation.¹³⁶ The rumbling and roaring of these raids, whether German aircraft and bombs or British guns, were still remembered 20 years later.¹³⁷ They had travelled deep into the mind and changed listening and its connotations. The sonic skills and sensitivities that had been developed in the trenches were not much use, perhaps, in civilian society, but they would persist. Robert Graves realised this in 1919 when he found himself flat on his face, taking cover automatically from the sound of a car backfiring.¹³⁸

One way to find some quiet and rebalance the mind was to create a small place of one's own away from urban life. Assemblages of higgledy-piggledy plotland homes appeared in the south-east of Britain after the war, spurred by the chance to be independent, without the need for building societies or even builders when jobs and money were so tight for many.¹³⁹ A simple plotland home in the countryside was a kind of home-made land cure for ex-servicemen and their families. Dreams of chicken-farming or market-gardening may have been easily shattered, 'but the patch

¹³² Siegfried Sassoon, 'Repression of War Experience', in Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War*, 98 and 255 note.

¹³³ Mary Beazley, 'The Sound of Flanders Guns', in Noakes, *Voices of Silence*, 297. Axel Volmar argues that in Germany after the war, both ex-servicemen and those who had not come into direct contact with the war heard differently: 'In Storms of Steel', 240-1.

¹³⁴ Lynda Mugglestone, '"That Siren Call..." The Diverse Language of Air-Raid Precautions in 1916', *English Words in Wartime*, 17 May, 2016, accessed 5 September, 2017, <https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com/2016/05/17/that-siren-call-the-diverse-language-of-air-raid-precautions-in-1916/>.

¹³⁵ See Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights*, 214-5, 252-3.

¹³⁶ William Sandhurst quoted in *ibid.*, 254.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹³⁸ Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 220.

¹³⁹ Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, *Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (London: Mansell, 1984). See also Gillian Darley, *Villages of Vision: A Study of Strange Utopias* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2007). The plotland movement coincided with 1919 legislation for homecoming soldiers, which provided funds to establish them on small-holdings or allotments: see Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, 88-9.

of land and the owner-built house on it remained as some kind of security'.¹⁴⁰

Stripping away the nostalgia of memory, Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward have found that 'the recollection of plotland people is a simple tale of quiet enjoyment', and healthy living centred around the fresh air, local farm produce and the 'tranquillity of a riverside haven or woodland setting'.¹⁴¹

Socially conscious medical men had found the noise of wartime and especially of the modern city to be a concern for national well-being. During the war, Dan McKenzie, a Scottish surgeon and ear, nose and throat specialist, published *City of Din: A Tirade Against Noise*. With hardly a word about shell shock, he railed instead against city noise while explaining the important kind of quiet offered by the natural world and the stirring sounds of the wind in the trees or the waves on the cliffs. Such sounds had a deep 'inner meaning' for humans, he argued; they were 'ineffable'.¹⁴² In a world where 'the breath of hot oil and metal' were becoming overwhelming,¹⁴³ the sounds and smells of the farm were able to relax the body and allow the mind to drift happily:

How warm and comforting is the smell of a byre full of cows! Plunge into it from the cool of the evening and listen again to the sudden swish of the warm milk into the pail, the uncompleted low of the sober cattle and the rattle of the chain as they turn to look at the new-comer. A gentle relaxation of the spirit attends the visit like the relief of the limbs from a cramped position, and we readily fall into that mood, so rare these latter days, when attention disperses and the reins drop on the neck of the mind so that it wanders on at its will up and down the lanes and by-ways of fancy.¹⁴⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Edwin Ash voiced concern that the entire working nation was at risk of nervous breakdown from the pressures of modern life, not just those who had fought. 'Brain-workers' – lawyers, social reformers, preachers, journalists, physicians – were particularly vulnerable to nervous instability and this threatened the national economic picture.¹⁴⁵ A physician and nerve specialist, Ash's recommendation was that state-funded sanatoria were made available to these kinds of valuable middle-class workers where they would regain their strength for the advantage of everyone. The rest cure was central to this programme of rebuilding national nerve strength. Though Ash's peaceful sanatoria were unaffordable on the scale he suggested, his book was a 'timely reminder of the dangers of emotionalism' in a brittle society, and of the need to find ways to recover and build strength after the

¹⁴⁰ Hardy and Ward, *Arcadia for All*, 191.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁴² Dan McKenzie, *City of Din: A Tirade against Noise* (London: Adlard, 1916), 20.

¹⁴³ Dan McKenzie, *Aromatics of the Soul: A Study of Smells* (London: Heinemann, 1923), 145.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-4.

¹⁴⁵ Edwin Ash, *The Problem of Nervous Breakdown* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 15-6.

war.¹⁴⁶ In Ash's book there are intimations of a race under threat, which draws upon pre-war fears of social degeneration and demoralisation in towns and cities. Those fears of the decline in the quality of the race were usually associated with the urban unemployed and casual labour.¹⁴⁷ Fiona Reid has made the point that the provision of a rural system of care and treatment for mentally wounded soldiers was part of regenerating a Britain that had been damaged not just by war but by the degeneracy of pre-war society.¹⁴⁸ British medical and political authorities perceived the countryside in general to be healthier and more morally wholesome than the urban environment.

In the years before the war, there was political and non-political unity around the idea that the land, small holding and agricultural work, and the countryside itself, were 'coming to represent order, stability and naturalness'.¹⁴⁹ This was not simply a matter of politics or economics, but of a reworking of culture. The industrial revolution as well as the industrial war of 1914-18 had challenged and changed civilisation, and the most essential parts of British culture would need to be retained and transmitted to reconstruct the nation.¹⁵⁰ The peaceful countryside was definitively part of this culture, even if this was a rhetoric expressed chiefly by urbanites and led most vocally in the post-war years by Stanley Baldwin's aesthetic ideals of rural Englishness.¹⁵¹ Beatrix Potter's tales and Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* were bedrocks of this culture, present throughout the war and needed all the more afterwards. Ernest Pulbrook epitomised in *The English Countryside* (1915) a mawkishly romanticised vision of rural life, telling of the peace and beauty of the landscape and the lessons of patience and hope it taught. His vision of rural England is built on 'ripeness and repose', 'ordered peace and settlement', 'tranquil spots where Nature holds sway', 'the sougling of the pine woods', 'the quavering bleat of new lambs', 'the song of the stream' and so on.¹⁵² Before and during the war, the quietude of rural England was firmly part of political and literary culture that was drawn ever closer after war. These comforting sonic traditions and familiarities of pre-war life relied on myth, but they

¹⁴⁶ 'The Problem of Nervous Breakdown', *The Spectator*, 13 March, 1920, 20.

¹⁴⁷ Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England 1869-1939* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 48-54.

¹⁴⁸ Reid, *Broken Men*, 76-7.

¹⁴⁹ Howkins, *The Discovery of Rural England*, 92.

¹⁵⁰ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 311-4. Hynes argues that talk of the end of civilisation after the war was widespread and that the highest values of culture were seen to be needed to reconstruct the nation. However, he also suggests that many perceived a chasm left by the war, which meant that reference to the old England of before the war would not help in reconstruction.

¹⁵¹ Simon Miller, 'Urban Dreams and Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920-45', *Rural History* 6 (1995): 89-9. Miller argues that Baldwin's 'England' speech was well-known. Baldwin's rural idealism did not include the commercial aspects of agriculture, rather it focused on the culture, leisure and wisdom that might be imparted from communion with the countryside and the seasons.

¹⁵² Ernest Pulbrook, *The English Countryside* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1915), 106.

were required for a society trying to find meaning in what had happened and recover.¹⁵³

I will finish this chapter with a short comment about the Armistice silence, the core of the ceremony.¹⁵⁴ The invention of the two-minute silence to mark the end of the war, first enacted in November 1919, says much about the power summoned by the curtailment of sound.¹⁵⁵ The status and meanings of silence in civic society must have altered after this event, though to pinpoint the character of this change is difficult.¹⁵⁶ One indication of the significance of this 'liturgical silence'¹⁵⁷ was that it was broadcast to the nation from the outset of John Reith's BBC. In November 1923, it was accompanied by 'The Last Post' and 'Reveille'. The broadcast was extended to include 'O God, our Help in Ages Past' in 1924 and the Lord's Prayer the following year; also in 1925, the sounds of the crowd gathering in Trafalgar Square were heard over the airwaves for two minutes beforehand, probably to heighten the sense of contrast with the stillness that followed.¹⁵⁸

As Adrian Gregory observes, the easiest option for the BBC would have been simply to stop broadcasting for the requisite two minutes. However, Reith's team was concerned not only to transport the listener to the vicinity of the Cenotaph, but also to convey a sense of both sublimity and *communitas*. The extraordinary effort and technological investment necessary to coordinate the silence across the regions by the strokes of Big Ben shows how important the BBC believed a concurrent emotional experience of the silence would be, and that it could orient listener's minds at this moment towards the political and constitutional heart of the nation.¹⁵⁹

A later account, published in the *Radio Times* in 1935, explains the intentions of the Special Broadcast engineers assigned to this event:

the silence is not a dead silence, for Big Ben strikes the hour, and then the bickering of sparrows, the crisp rustle of falling leaves, the creasing of pigeons' wings as they take flight, uneasy at the strange hush, contrast with the traffic

¹⁵³ Winter has argued that individuals turned to the past, returning to 'ordered patterns and themes' to make sense of the war: *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 6-7.

¹⁵⁴ On silence and commemoration after war from international perspectives see E. Ben-Ze'ev, R. Genie and J. Winter, eds, *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Gregory, *The Silence of Memory* is the foundational text about the British Armistice. On music see James G. Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance 1923-1927', *Historical Journal* 52 (2009); Rachel Cowgill, 'Canonizing Remembrance: Music for Armistice Day at the BBC, 1922-7', *First World War Studies* 2 (2011).

¹⁵⁵ Gregory, *Silence of Memory*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ J. Winter, 'Thinking about Silence', in E. Ben-Ze'ev, *Shadows of War*, 3-31.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Cowgill, 'Canonizing Remembrance', 77.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

din of London some minutes before. Naturally vigilant control of the microphone is essential. The muffled sobs of distressed onlookers, for instance. Audible distress too near a microphone would create a picture out of perspective as regards the crowd's solemn impassivity and feelings.

Our job is to reduce all local noises to the right proportions, so that the Silence may be heard for what it really is, a solvent which destroys personality and gives us leave to be great and universal.¹⁶⁰

Those words at the end of this quotation express a very Reithian idea of what broadcast radio should achieve, something that will be explored in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note that the sounds of nature are here granted permission to inhabit even the most sacred of silences. The BBC engineers in this commentary show that what humans perceive as quiet and silence are so closely linked to the voices of nature that sometimes they are interchangeable. Quiet is nature and nature is quiet, to echo Baldwin's injunction. Perhaps more than this though, in the years and even decades after WWI, all these closely inter-related sounds are inextricably tied to notions of healing and recovery.

Conclusion

It is clear that most soldiers with psychological symptoms that could be called shell shock were not treated at all; fewer still received any kind of quiet rest. Yet those who could find it seemed to benefit from a recourse to arcadia, and the authorities, especially in retrospect, saw sense in drawing on the qualities and traditions of the English countryside to heal the wounded. There was little else to turn to; the quiet pastoral provided a medical and political refuge from a bewildering crisis. The continuities of tradition were needed and fallen back on. The 'peaceable place on the other side' of Hynes' 'great chasm' was a pre-war haven that society had to re-connect to, a past far too precious to consign to history.¹⁶¹ The status and role of the quietude associated with the English countryside was brought all the more to the fore of British culture during and immediately after WWI.

Quiet rest I have found has a central but neglected place in the history of recovery from shell shock and societal recovery in the post-war years. The 1922 Southborough Commission gave credit to quiet rest as part of a move to banish the phenomenon of shell shock from the medical lexicon, diminish claims for pensions and manage societal concerns that mental breakdown was endemic in British soldiers. But this

¹⁶⁰ H. H. Thompson quoted in Gregory, *Silence of Memory*, 135.

¹⁶¹ *A War Imagined*, ix-xi.

official position was only tenable because of deeply-held beliefs in the healing effects of the nation's land and green places. Medical reliance on the traditional rest cure for neurasthenia gave prominence to the role of quietude while re-classifying shell shock as a well-known but manageable problem of modern life. The prescription of quiet rest was a way to make shell shock recede from public view.

During the war, public sympathy for shell-shocked officers was evidenced by a wave of offers of access to leafy London squares and country houses away from the metropolis. Country house therapy for officers was a mark of class privilege, but also reflected beliefs about the moral purity of the countryside as the locus of healing. After the war that many saw as a disaster of industrial progress, there is a noticeable anti-urban and anti-industry tone to debates about how Britain should care for its ex-servicemen and recover more generally as a nation. Notwithstanding the Ministry of Pensions' motives for pushing land work as a method of rejuvenating disabled soldiers while containing pension claims, there is in addition a fundamental romantic tendency in the utopian ideology of Enham Village Centre, in the grandeur of the Red Cross Homes of Recovery programme, and the rather effeminate blackberrying and basket-weaving rhythms promoted at Seale-Hayne military hospital, all of which feed upon the tranquillity of country life. The sounds of such activities are rarely spelt out, but they were certainly in stark contrast to the sounds and repetitions of work in the city or factory. Enham's idyllic picture of the peaceful nation in recovery is particularly striking and long-lived. While this was the only Village Centre to be established, it thrived and grew during the interwar period as its shell-shocked rank-and-file men had families, some of whom still live there today.

In these settings for shell shock recovery – country houses during the war and Enham's new community after it – the qualities and textures of quiet can be detected in the philosophy, activities and environment, even though the sonic is not always explicit. Peace and quiet surfaces in newspaper coverage, in photography and promotional material. In this analysis, then, I have made the assumed and implicit sounds prescribed for shell shock recovery explicit and subject to consideration for the first time. In doing so, the kind of quietude that soldiers are placed within is revealed to be that which emanates from the natural world: from gardens, parks, stately home grounds, plots of farmland, thatched cottage environs and pre-eminently the countryside.

The term shell shock escaped from medical discourse to become a metaphor for the damage the war had inflicted within British society, Winter has argued.¹⁶² In the post-war period it is evident that quiet continued to be valued, needed not just for healing damaged minds but to re-civilise a nation anxious to comprehend and leave behind the industrial brutality it had participated in. Quiet was canonised in the Armistice silence, but it was sought out every day in parks and plotland hideaways outside of London. After all, the nation had a new sonic awareness after the war. Several million men and women brought back with them new sensitivities to sound as they returned to civilian life. Those who had spent the war on the home front in the south-east of England had also become far more sonic minded as, for four years, they had listened out for air raids and heard the artillery rumbling on the Western Front. In the next chapter, the sonic aftershocks of WWI will be considered in the establishment of Britain's first broadcasting efforts and the place of nature's sounds in that new media context.

¹⁶² 'Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War', 7-11.

3. Broadcasting spiritualised with nature's sounds and silences

The first two chapters have examined the place of nature's sounds in the experiences of men fighting on the Western Front or recovering from the fight at home. This and the following chapter concentrate instead on civilian experiences of listening to nature on the new medium of radio. As the first electronic mass medium, BBC broadcasting is the focus, as it provides a source of rich debate about British culture and its dissemination, from wireless experts, journalists and the large public audience of listeners. This context allows me to extend my examination of the place of nature's sounds in culture under the continuing pressures of industrial modernity and the aftermath of war, early radio broadcasting itself being seen as a threat to culture. Public service broadcasting is an important setting because this concept meant that public opinion mattered, however paternalistic initial programme planning was, and because listeners' thoughts and opinions were believed to be malleable and therefore susceptible to the power of radio.¹

In this chapter I explore how the new domestic technology of radio and concepts of the 'silence' of the natural world were intertwined in the first five years of BBC broadcasting. In particular, I assess how John Reith's vision for the BBC as a public service needed and used the sounds of everyday nature, as well as its grander schemes, to convey the full potential of what broadcasting could offer Britons. Some of this potential was demonstrated by the transmission of birdsong, some through the possibilities of encountering nature's unheard murmurings, and perhaps the greatest was found in the chance to connect public minds to the order, stillness and harmony of the cosmos. Could sounds of the everyday British microcosm alongside the heavenly arrangements of the macrocosm counter the cacophony and trauma of post-war modern life, and help establish the new medium as a force for cultural enlightenment? How could silence be part of a new broadcasting medium anyway?

I argue that the well-known nightingale broadcast served to define a small but essential part of Reith's vision for public service broadcasting. Reith believed that the public response demonstrated how broadcasting could do more than convey human culture, that it could be transcendent, even suggestive of a sublime silence that all Britons needed. I also argue that many cultural elites, and not only those at the BBC,

¹ Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 8; Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 23-4; Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 17.

found within the ideas of the physics of radio waves and the ether a kind of cosmic nature-theology, in which listening to the radio put all souls in all nations in direct and instantaneous contact with the heavens. At the end of the chapter, the urge to normalise the medium with its mysterious and invisible electromagnetic waves is shown to be part of a naturalising process, with the purpose of establishing the BBC's work with the public. Broadcasting was cast as an entirely natural phenomenon and one that could be appreciated outdoors, in the countryside, with the benefit of nature's own enhancing acoustics.

Broadcasting historians have examined John Reith's philosophy of broadcasting² and some have noted the place of nature in early BBC broadcasting.³ D. L. LeMahieu noted that in the 1920s, 'the BBC needed to transform wireless into a respectable medium of cultural exchange' for it to gain legitimacy with the middle classes and that it did this by asserting radio to be a modern miracle of science.⁴ Others have looked at the part the 'medium' of the ether played in the public reception and scientific conceptualisation of wireless radio, although most of this work concentrates on the USA and the era prior to WWI when the scientific theories of ether were most robust.⁵ The links between these domains, to view the sounds of the British rural together with the wireless medium and its connections to the universe as two parts of the grand scheme of the natural world, have not yet been made. The historical context of the post-war period is important. David Hendy has argued that the early BBC was shaped by personal wartime struggles, such that the BBC of the 1920s can be thought of as an institution shaped by 'systems of feeling', as much as by rational policy-making.⁶ James Mansell has pointed to intellectual currents outside the mainstream, such as spiritualism and Theosophy, which informed ideas about how to heal and re-enchant Britons with musical and other sounds after war, some of which achieved national exposure.⁷ Certainly, the moods and anxieties emerging from war were pervasive and long-lasting.⁸ The sources I engage with span the period 1922-27, the first five years of BBC broadcasting. I consider the ideas of broadcasting experts here, chiefly, as well as public debate from listeners and critics. These ideas were new and often philosophical, but they were subject to public and

² Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 20-26; Avery, *Radio Modernism*, 7-16; Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*.

³ Hendy, 'The Great War and British Broadcasting', 92; Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 81-2.

⁴ *A Culture for Democracy*, 180-2.

⁵ Enns, 'Psychic Radio'; Douglas, *Listening In*, 40-51; Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 101-8.

⁶ 'The Great War and British Broadcasting', 84.

⁷ *The Age of Noise*, 76-86; Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance, 1923-1927', *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009).

⁸ See Overy, *The Morbid Age*; Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76-104; David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

listener exposure. The key sources are the writings of leading BBC men John Reith and Arthur Burrows, along with the *Radio Times*, broadcasting journals, and national and regional press.

The public service nightingale: a silence craved and needed

Voices! Voices! The voices of a mighty multitude, year in, year out, holyday and holiday, noon and night, flow over our heads and under our feet in a ceaseless, silent chorus.⁹

New electric media had always been imagined to be full of unregulated conversation. In ‘Telephone London’ the journalist Henry Thompson worried about the telegraph and telephone messages fluxing across cities and nations. Radio and then broadcasting brought similar concerns of communication overload, yet John Reith could think of his broadcasting as ‘the voice from the silence’.¹⁰ He argued that his broadcasters, with their own personalities and intimate engagements with listeners, were this new, carefully considered voice. To speak to the nation was an honourable role ‘that only those of exceptional and proved capacity are fit to aspire to’, Reith wrote.¹¹ The broadcaster was a ‘guide, philosopher and friend’, but above all someone of imagination.¹² This imagination was put into action from the very beginning of the BBC to bring a special voice to the wireless.

In May 1924, a still-iconic and fondly recalled broadcast event took place, where a nightingale – or perhaps a set of nightingales – was heard to sing along with Beatrice Harrison’s cello performance in her Surrey garden. Scholars have tended to account for this episode as a media stunt or a natural history curiosity rather than assigning it any more significant cultural meaning in relation to the new project of public service broadcasting.¹⁴ Kate Lacey and David Hendy have touched on its significance to early broadcasting and since 2014 the BBC has hosted a recording of the duet on its website.¹⁵ But the broader context of nature or natural history programmes has hardly been accounted for in the period before WWII, yet the sounds and stories of nature

⁹ Henry Thompson, ‘Telephone London’, in *Living London*, ed. George Sims, Volume 3, Section 1 (London: Cassell, 1901), 115.

¹⁰ Reith, *Broadcast*, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51, 54.

¹⁴ Iain Logie Baird, ‘Capturing the Song of the Nightingale’, *Science Museum Journal* 4 (2015), accessed 6 September, 2017, <http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-04/capturing-the-song-of-the-nightingale/>; Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 178-80; Mark Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing* (London: Penguin, 2006), 142-3; Mabey, *Whistling in the Dark*, 99-111.

¹⁵ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 81-2; Hendy, ‘The Great War and British Broadcasting’, 92. The BBC’s website includes a recording as part of its institutional history, ‘Beatrice Harrison, Cello and Nightingale Duet 19 May 1924’, accessed 23 May, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01z12h7>.

were a notable component of early BBC wireless programming.¹⁶ Broadcasts from London Zoo were transmitted in late 1924 and Julian Huxley's series 'Bird-Watching and Bird Behaviour' aired in 1930, for example.

To understand the nightingale broadcast requires immersion in the minds of the men who established the service and strove to gain public and political acceptance of a monopoly of the airwaves. John Reith was one of these men, and in large part the vision and reality of the early years of the BBC was a reflection of Reith's substantial personality. He gave the BBC 'form and purpose',¹⁷ and the 'near absurdity of his vision enabled him to foresee the power of the new service'.¹⁸ His megalomania and dominating style, steeped in Presbyterian morality, is well known, but there was also much thoughtfulness and some sensitivity.¹⁹ While serving with the 5th Scottish Rifles in 1915, he took care to introduce his men to God, distributing twenty-two 'little khaki-bound New Testaments'.²⁰ The sonic sensitivities of battle were remembered over 40 years later in his autobiography: 'When one hears the vicious snap of a bullet the danger is past. The whine of a shell, pitch and volume according to nature and size, heralding its coming.' But Reith's excitement was evident too in his war-time diary: 'Most thrilling to hear the shells whistling through the air and to wonder how near they're going to land'.²¹ The other men with whom Reith worked in the first BBC office on Kingsway in London lived with their own war experiences. They are relevant to the nightingale episode, as we shall see.

Reith was determined for broadcasting to be accepted as an essential part of national culture, if not of civilisation.²² Any suggestion that what rapidly became seen by many as the 'broadcasting craze' was yet another ubiquitous modern noise to accompany telephony, the gramophone, motor transport, train travel and uncontrolled outdoor advertising, was challenged by Reith with gusto.²³ At the same time, he wanted to see that 'any and all' Britons could 'gain access' to the world of politics and culture, which

¹⁶ Two books that begin their survey of BBC wildlife broadcasting after WWII are Derek Jones, *Microphones and Muddy Boots. A Journey into Natural History Broadcasting* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1987) and Michael Bright, *100 Years of Wildlife* (London: BBC Books, 2007).

¹⁷ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 1, The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 127.

¹⁸ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: Press and Broadcasting in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997), 111-12.

¹⁹ Hendy argues that Reith recognised his own psychological weaknesses, reading the scriptures as well as Freud: *Public Service Broadcasting*, 20-1.

²⁰ Hazel Southam, 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation', Bible Society, accessed 27 May, 2017, <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/what-we-do/england-and-wales/world-war-1/stories/nation-shall-speak-peace-unto-nation/>.

²¹ Reith, *Into the Wind*, 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 103.

²³ The 'broadcasting craze' was already frazzling the nerves of some in the first year of the BBC's operations. It was 'that disturber of the peace in our homes, hotels, tea-shops, shaving saloons, and railway trains. The stress and excitement of modern life are enough to rattle the nerves of the strongest of us, and we need peace and quiet as restoratives': letter, *John O' London's Weekly*, 11 August, 1923, 625.

did indeed require ubiquitous reach across the nation.²⁴ In early 1924 one wireless magazine journalist delighted in the thought that ‘the time is at hand when no place in forest, mountain or moor shall be too isolated to be linked with the life that is throbbing in the metropolis’.²⁵ Wilfred Whitten, editor of the popular literary magazine *John O’ London’s Weekly*, couldn’t think of anything more intrusive. He described broadcasting as ‘this immense new lure of life’.²⁶ As a literary man, Whitten was appalled by the promise of wireless everywhere because it would defile Romantic tradition and culture by invading the fresh air of the cherished English rural. ‘I wonder what Wordsworth would have said or done had he lived to know that the air of his Lakeland mountains and valleys was alive with our West-end tumult’, wrote Whitten.

While he was happy to see loneliness relieved by wireless for far-flung lighthouse-men or Highland shepherds, Whitten wondered why the sounds of nature could not be beamed into urban homes rather than voices from the city being relayed across Britain. In an article of March 1924 entitled ‘The Lure and Fear of Broadcasting’, Whitten lobbied the BBC:

I wish there could be an exchange of experiences between the silences of Nature and the hum of the city. I would set up my aerial to-morrow if, in the heart of London, I could hear the cattle lowing on the remote hills, or the barking of a fox in Essex, or the scream of an eagle over a Scottish glen. I would gladly summon the roar of Niagara to redress the roar of the Strand; but such things are not yet.²⁷

Reith wrote promptly to tell *John O’ London’s* readers that the ‘sounds of the country’ had always been part of the broadcasting plan, and revealed that soon the ‘liquid notes of the nightingales shall be borne in mystic ether waves to the home of the jaded town-dweller’.²⁸ Reith had indeed been planning with his engineering team since late 1923 the possibility of transmitting the live broadcast from a Surrey garden of a duet between a nightingale and the cellist Beatrice Harrison playing ‘The Londonderry Air’.²⁹ This would have been the first live broadcast from an outdoor location outside of London, and for Reith it needed to have more purpose and substance than a mere publicity stunt. Harrison, a family friend of Elgar and an expert with his cello repertoire, had telephoned Reith to persuade him, but she reports he was ‘very

²⁴ Reith, *Broadcast*, 15-17.

²⁵ Wilfred Whitten, ‘The Lure and Fear of Broadcasting’, *John O’ London’s Weekly*, 15 March, 1924, 865.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ John Reith, ‘The Lure and Fear of Broadcasting. A Reply to John O’ London’, *John O’ London’s Weekly*, 22 March, 1924, 938.

²⁹ Arthur Burrows, ‘Broadcasting the Nightingale’, *Radio Times*, 14 December, 1923, 428.

dubious'.³¹ Nevertheless, Reith was eventually convinced and sanctioned the experimental broadcast from Harrison's wooded garden for May 1924, when the nightingale would, in theory, be in full song.

Eighteen months after BBC broadcasting began, at a quarter to eleven in the evening on Monday 19th of May, the Savoy Opheans' jazz dance music was interrupted by the nightingale in full song. Over several nights that May, the broadcast went out live to the nation, the bird sometimes performing for 15 minutes. The broadcasts were a sensation, perhaps a million people listening in late at night, and Harrison claimed to have received 50,000 letters (Figure 12).³² An analysis of the few surviving letters written by men, women, the young and the elderly from the archives of the Royal College of Music makes it clear that for most the bird was the star.³³ Letters came from Huddersfield, Gosforth in Northumberland, Glasgow and Belfast, regions well to the north of the nightingale's range. Through folklore, its singing abilities were legendary, and the nightingale had provoked more poetry in the English language than any other bird.³⁴ But few had ever witnessed the song of this small shy brown bird for themselves, though men in the trenches had heard it and written about the experience.

R. M. Monk from Bramhall in Cheshire said this: 'I wonder do you know what it means to dwellers in the commercial north to enjoy for a few moments the pleasure of the nightingale's song – if you do, then all your efforts are rewarded'.³⁵ A man in Godalming wrote to tell Harrison that from the loudspeaker in his garden the broadcast nightingale provoked another of the species to sing along. W. J. Daully had also been enthralled:

Will you please accept the very grateful thanks of a Liverpool postman and his mother for the great joy that you were instrumental in bringing to their ears last night. The reading [of] Keats' Ode before your work made one prepared for the atmosphere and mood and we heard the bird's notes very distinctly so too was your playing of the cello. By the same post I am sending you our leading morning paper and you will see by the enclosed poster that Liverpool well for one day forgot tragedy, politics, cricket and horse racing. We are anxiously waiting for further recitals. May we have them please.³⁶

³¹ Patricia Cleveland-Peck, *The Cello and the Nightingales: The Autobiography of Beatrice Harrison* (London: John Murray, 1985), 128-31.

³² Ibid., 133. There were just over a million licence holders at the end of 1924, but there could be several listening at once and an unknown group of unlicensed listeners too. See Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 17.

³³ Harrison Sisters' Collection, Royal College of Music, London, box 224. These are letters and cards from 1924-27 and are presumably edited highlights.

³⁴ Cocker, *Birds Britannica*, 340.

³⁵ R. M. Monk, letter, Harrison Sisters' Collection, Royal College of Music, London, box 224.

³⁶ W. J. Daully, letter, *ibid.*

There are few other live broadcast events from outside the studio to compare this to; broadcasts from theatres and music halls were largely banned from 1923 to June 1925 to preserve their revenues.³⁷ The first major outdoor broadcast was the Duke of York's wedding in April 1923, where microphones were carefully placed to enable listeners to hear the sounds of bells, horses, carriages and cheering crowds.³⁸ The event was not recorded; like the nightingale's song, this was a brief slice of reality that was both transient and singular. Yet the nightingale broadcast was intimate and mysterious, emerging from darkness, without ceremony.

Just how much nightingale could really be heard appears to have been highly variable, perhaps because of different broadcasting conditions around the country and the many kinds of receiving equipment in use, some of which was home-made. During this early period of broadcasting listening in was a hit-and-miss affair.³⁹ Most listening happened through simple earphones or headphones, not a loudspeaker, so there was a certain kind of intimacy at play as many would listen alone. From the above accounts, some may well have heard a clear representation of the nightingale's song. For others, it may have been enough to hear the suggestion of the bird in song being broadcast live through the darkness. The *idea* of the nightingale's song, collected in Surrey, carried through the ether, and reconstituted in one's home, was sufficiently potent for many. Perhaps its emergence through the pops and oscillations lent more magic. But not everyone was happy with what they heard. Some heard only radio 'atmospherics', or was that twigs cracking under foot or the wind in the trees?⁴⁰ There was disappointment in some newspapers, the *Bristol Times and Mirror* arguing that many 'experts [...] might never have guessed what the sound really was' had they not known beforehand.⁴¹ Some Birmingham listeners found that broadcasting was powerless to communicate the 'exquisite richness and wonderful variety' of the song which could only really work its charms on the listener in a 'moonlit glade'.⁴² That stories began to circulate about fakery and deception involving BBC bird imitators suggests that the broadcasts were in fact rather convincing.⁴³ Reith discounted critics who said that a mediated and commodified 'tinned nightingale' would take away the

³⁷ Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 73.

³⁸ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 200.

³⁹ Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 356-8. The enjoyment of music was diminished by the low fidelity of the apparatus and 'oscillation', which could produce sounds 'like the chirping of crickets': J. A. Fleming, 'The Polite Use of the Ether', *Radio Times*, 2 July, 1926, 41.

⁴⁰ John Reith, 'When Silence Was Served', *Radio Times*, 12 June, 1925, 529-30.

⁴¹ 'Listening-in', *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 22 May 1924, 6.

⁴² 'A Word for the Nightingale', *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 24 May, 1924, no pagination.

⁴³ Reith, 'When Silence Was Served', 530. For a more recent controversy about the authenticity of the nightingale performances see Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 312-7.

appetite for encounters with the real thing.⁴⁴ He argued that the broadcasts were not standardising existence by distributing the world's experiences to the doorstep of anyone and everyone, rather they were a call to the outdoors and a chance for those who did not have the chance to hear such a delight to share in it.⁴⁵



Figure 12. Beatrice Harrison poses with her cello on the left and a microphone set-up is shown on the right (Popular Wireless and Wireless Review, 31 May and 7 June, 1924).

For all this, Reith was thrilled by the public response. He wrote in the *Radio Times* after the broadcasts that the nightingale ‘has swept the country [...] with a wave of something akin to emotionalism and the glamour of romance has flashed across the prosaic round of many a life’.⁴⁶ Reith’s use of the word ‘emotionalism’ is curious and powerful, usually meaning during this period a tendency towards a state of nervous agitation or hysteria. It was not a frame of mind Reith would have wanted to create with his broadcasting as a matter of course, but he was clearly taken by the wide impact that broadcasting could have across the nation, demonstrated by the voice of one little bird. Reith received letters of appreciation himself. One of the first was from the ‘head of one of the great industrial undertakings of the country’ and this is what it said: ‘I have heard and seen a good many remarkable things in my life, but the most remarkable thing that has come within my experience was the broadcasting of the

⁴⁴ John Blunt, ‘Nightingales and Headphones’, *Daily Mail*, 20 May, 1924, 7; John Reith, ‘Concerning Tinned Nightingale’, *Radio Times*, 11 April, 1924, 85-6.

⁴⁵ Reith, *Broadcast*, 129. For a discussion of the standardisation debates in the 1930s see Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 39.

⁴⁶ John Reith, ‘The Broadcasting of Silence’, *Radio Times*, 6 June, 1924, 437.

song of the nightingale last night'.⁴⁷ This meant a great deal to Reith. The broadcast was far more than a confirmation of romantic myths – the song of the nightingale was full of symbolic meaning for the scheme of broadcasting.

A philosophy of silence

A crucial document in which to explore Reith's thinking at this time, and a landmark in broadcasting history, is his manifesto *Broadcast Over Britain*, in which he reflects on the first eighteen months of his work as managing director of the BBC. He used the book to defend the monopoly position he had been given and to express his philosophy of a public service broadcasting that should 'bring the best of everything into the greatest number of homes'.⁴⁸ It is in the final chapter, which Reith named 'In Touch with the Infinite', that he explains how important the sounds of nature are to this broadcasting vision.

Among the great paradoxes of life come the companionship of solitude and the voice of silence. To men and women confined in the narrow streets of the great cities shall be brought many of the voices of Nature, calling them to the enjoyment of her myriad delights. There is some peculiar quality about certain sounds, since they may not be incompatible with the conditions of silence. Already we have broadcast a voice which few have opportunity of hearing for themselves. The song of the nightingale has been heard all over the country, on highland moors and in the tenements of great towns. Milton has said that when the nightingale sang, silence was pleased. So in the song of the nightingale we have broadcast something of the silence which all of us in this busy world unconsciously crave and urgently need.⁴⁹

Reith says a great deal in this striking passage. Nature's voices are a national delight and treasure, he argues, a sentiment that had been heard from Stanley Baldwin in the same year when he spoke of the sounds of the countryside being emblematic of Englishness. The listening public seemed to accord with this view. But more importantly for Reith, birdsong constituted a kind of silence – it was compatible with silence, could become part of silence, inhabit it.⁵⁰ This was something that broadcast human voices and music could not achieve, and Reith was acutely sensitive to suggestions that broadcasting created yet more modern noise and unsettled minds.⁵¹ An editorial in *The Times* was reminded by the nightingale broadcast that a good many 'are not over-keen on listening night after night to ephemerality' of the human voice and human music.⁵² The opinions of the public about BBC output were many

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Reith, *Broadcast*, 147.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁰ Maitland writes that birds are not silent, 'but still they somehow inhabit the spaces of silence. You need to be silent to see them, and they come and go as a silent gift': *A Book of Silence*, 160.

⁵¹ See Hendy's discussion of broadcasting's capability to un-balance minds and outlooks: 'The Great War and British Broadcasting', 101.

⁵² Editorial, 'Broadcasting Birds', *Times*, 21 May, 1924, 15.

and there was always discontent about the variety on offer: ‘there was not enough jazz; there was too much jazz; the drama was too exciting; the talks were too dull; there was not enough light comedy; there was too much symphonic music’.⁵³ Instead of all this, the nightingale broadcast was a chance to show that broadcasting could transmit sounds that were extraordinary, out-of-this-world, noiseless. Ernest Pulbrook in his romanticised chronicle of country life identified the paradox of how natural sounds could exist happily within silence. ‘All seems very still in the beech wood’, he wrote, ‘but if we stand awhile and listen the air is full of sound, almost *noiseless sounds* as it were – the cooing of the wood pigeon, the hum of insects, the call of the chaffinch’.⁵⁴

The sounds and rhythms of nature had always been part of national culture. Literature, poetry and music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the long-held and sensual love affair with the English pastoral ideal and the nature it was made from.⁵⁵ Broadcasting, Reith argued, was a servant of culture, ‘and culture has been called the study of perfection’.⁵⁶ He offered the nightingale’s song as an example of such perfection and included such sounds in his proposition of the ‘best of everything’. Drawing inspiration from Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Reith wanted his broadcasting of culture to encourage Britons to resist the trivial and ‘relish the sublime’.⁵⁷ Like Arnold, Reith wanted culture to be classless (middle-class culture),⁵⁸ and his thoughts on the sounds of nature specifically point to the enjoyment to be had by millions of men and women of Britain’s cities. Not only the emotions of poets were stirred when hearing the sounds of nature. It is important to say that much of Reith’s best of everything would alienate many who were not familiar with or educated to be open to such delicacies. The sounds of nature on the other hand were open to all, requiring no education. Even though the nightingale could appeal to the masses, it was not mass culture because it was not mass-produced. Rather it was rare, noble, pure, exquisite, enduring, moral, transcendent, yet all could appreciate it.⁵⁹

Reith centred his last chapter, ‘In Touch with the Infinite’, on what he hoped would be the spiritual potential of radio broadcasting. The silence of nature was the silence of the universe watched over by his God. The song of the nightingale became in Reith’s

⁵³ Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 234.

⁵⁴ Pulbrook, *The English Countryside*, 106. My emphasis.

⁵⁵ See for example, Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015); James and Tew, *New Versions of Pastoral*.

⁵⁶ Reith, *Broadcast*, 217.

⁵⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 111, 122. See Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 14-16, on Arnoldian Reithianism.

⁵⁸ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, 79.

⁵⁹ On mass culture and the public mind see Searle, *A New England?*, 107-15, 530-70; Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 13-15.

formulation a connection to the spiritual, if not a voice of God. Reith's silence was a sound filled with potential and inspiration. However, Reith's ideas about the broadcasting of culture were not disconnected from the social realities of post-war Britain. The traumas of the war were still fresh in the mind and the silence of remembrance that the Armistice ritual had introduced had brought new power to the place of silence in everyday life. With this rite 'this generation has received an imperishable lesson in the beauty of Silence' and had come to understand the virtue of stillness, Wilfred Whitten claimed.⁶⁰ Quiet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was not only something that shell-shocked men needed. Loud noises still threw many into panic. There must have been many ex-servicemen who felt, as Robert Graves did, that it would be years before they could 'face anything but a quiet country life'.⁶¹ Reith, and the men who established the BBC with him, Arthur Burrows, Peter Eckersley and Cecil Lewis, had all had roles in WWI themselves. Burrows had run a news service during the war and had seen enough to become a life-long pacifist.⁶² All were likely to be seeking their own kinds of social and personal stability after the war, and reflected this in their decision-making.⁶³ In intellectual and scientific circles, the war had left a feeling of fear that the West was facing a terminal crisis of civilisation.⁶⁴

Reith was anxious that 'the broadcasting of silence' was not forgotten too quickly, because he saw the nightingale broadcast as an important break from the 'traditional stolidity of our race'. The emotionalism that had poured forth from those that heard the nightingale was actually a precious disruption to humdrum preoccupations with 'the review of sundry divorce and murder cases now proceeding; to the traffic problems of London, and to the threatened collapse of various bridges':⁶⁵

There are times when the traditional stolidity of our race gives way. The barriers of reserve are broken. Latent and normally disciplined emotionalism is revealed. For a little while a measure of sentimentality is unashamed. Then, of course, "better feelings" assert themselves. Cultured restraint, tempered with a measure of cynicism, holds sway again. The trivial weakness of the moment is forgotten; equilibrium is restored.⁶⁶

The silence had punctuated busy lives with a chance to *feel* for a few moments. If this was acknowledged and accepted, then the resumption of modern life could be coped with a little better. To ensure that the effect would be recreated and become part of the

⁶⁰ Wilfred Whitten, 'Pray Silence', *John O' London's Weekly*, 21 July, 1923, 517.

⁶¹ Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 236. Graves and Hodge reported that 'in most cases the blood was not running pure again for four or five years; and in numerous cases men who had managed to avoid a nervous breakdown during the war collapsed badly in 1921 or 1922': *The Long Week-End*, 23.

⁶² Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 12.

⁶³ Hendy, 'The Great War and British Broadcasting', 84.

⁶⁴ Overy, *The Morbid Age*; Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, 141-5.

⁶⁵ Reith, 'The Broadcasting of Silence', 347.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

permanent culture of broadcasting itself, Reith went on to authorise the nightingale broadcasts every May for the next 12 years, until Beatrice Harrison moved house.⁶⁷ Then the bird would sing alone annually until 1942, when the microphones picked up a British bombing raid in progress and the transmission had to be aborted.⁶⁸

What Reith had done was to give the nightingale broadcasts a distinct part in the definition of public service broadcasting – a broadcasting that could refresh and enchant everyone, pointing human hearts towards the infinite, catering to people’s unconscious needs, not simply their immediate compulsions and desires. In 1943, Anthony Asquith included a re-enactment of the duet between Harrison and a nightingale in his propaganda comedy *The Demi-Paradise*. The film explored English character and values as seen through the eyes of a Russian inventor, played by Lawrence Olivier, and spelled out that the strength of Britain’s traditions, not least the eccentric ones and the belief in duty and service, would win the war. In one scene, Harrison playing herself performed with an unseen (and this time, recorded) nightingale in the garden of a country mansion, while two BBC engineers busied themselves to put it out live on the radio in spite of a German bombing raid in progress. The ‘radio public must never be disappointed, Blitz or no Blitz’, the bemused Russian inventor is told.⁶⁹ As Harrison wrote in her memoirs, recalling this film, ‘all was to go on as usual’, the bird singing along with the cello and the BBC broadcasting the event to the nation.⁷⁰

Mysticism in radio and in nature

The appearance of birdsong on the radio reflected wider societal interests in nature, evidenced by appetites for Beatrix Potter’s tales, Kenneth Graham’s *Wind in the Willows*, W. H. Hudson’s literary pastoralism and Parry’s musical setting of Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’, introduced to the public in 1916. Nature study was now part of the school curriculum in England, and if *Punch* was to be believed, ‘feeding the birds’ had been a national pastime since before the war.⁷¹ There was increasing scientific interest in bird life too. Harry Witherby had founded the influential journal *British Birds* in 1907 and the post-war period saw a definable subculture of ‘birdwatching’, encouraged by Julian Huxley, gradually replace the Victorian passion for collecting.⁷²

⁶⁷ Mabey, *Whistling in the Dark*, 103.

⁶⁸ Sam Bonner, audio recording, 1924, British Library catalogue number C653/3. Sam Bonner, Senior Duty Officer at the BBC’s London Control Room in 1942, says in this recording that the ‘bird and bomber-force were equal in volume’ when he requested a recording line to be established and advised against transmission.

⁶⁹ *The Demi-Paradise*, 1943, dir. Anthony Asquith.

⁷⁰ Cleveland-Peck, *The Cello and the Nightingales*, 162.

⁷¹ David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist In Britain: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 183, 210.

⁷² Moss, *A Bird in the Bush*, 122.

Around the time of the nightingale broadcast and in its wake, enthusiasm for detecting and transmitting live the sounds of nature was all the more vivid on the wireless. The ‘Grand Howl’ by George, the London station director’s dog, was as much talked about by *Children’s Hour* listeners as the nightingale was among adults.⁷³ The BBC’s engineering chief, Peter Eckersley, conducted experiments at London Zoo with a cumbersome ‘wireless perambulator’ of gear to transmit the calls of a ‘laughing jackass’ bird and a hyena,⁷⁴ the first zoo noises being broadcast for children in November 1924.⁷⁵ In January 1925 there was an extensive preview in the *Radio Times* of an experimental night-time broadcast from an undisclosed location described as ‘one of the finest wildfowl rivers in England’. While it was not possible to say when the transmission would take place, the organisers promised: ‘We are fated to stand on deck and take the cries of the birds and the sounds of their wings as we sail up and down the river to transmit to you’. Along with the ‘regular lap, lap, lap of the water as it strikes the boat’, listeners could expect to hear widgeon, wild goose, mallard, teal, shelduck, swan, curlew, golden plover, lapwing, redshanks, stint, snipe, black-headed gull, herring gull and heron.⁷⁶ On top of these examples, in 1924 and 1925 the *Radio Times* listed and printed features on talks and series about more zoo animals, butterflies in winter, tips on canary care, the nesting behaviour of the cuckoo, bees and gardening, the habits of the fox, identification of birdsong, the possibility of animal wireless communication (particularly insect communication), the habits of the dormouse, and the joys of listening to the radio outside in the summer in the garden, on motoring excursions, at the beach and when picnicking, for example.

What is clear from these few examples is that some of these broadcasts and features were full of fun and novelty, while others were quite serious endeavours to bring new broadcast experiences, through depicting nature in action, into listeners’ homes. Most of these talks were aimed at adults more than children, and while we know little about the reception of BBC nature programmes, Reith does single out and distinguish this genre from talks about physics, astronomy and chemistry when he says in *Broadcast Over Britain*: ‘Introductions to the study of Natural History, the habits and the ways of familiar animals and birds and fishes, have proved intensely human in their appeal’.⁷⁷ Less apparent than the practical and educational value of these kinds of

⁷³ Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 262.

⁷⁴ Peter Eckersley, ‘Broadcasting the Zoo’, *Radio Times*, 22 August, 1924, 374.

⁷⁵ Burrows, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 262.

⁷⁶ Edward C. Ash, “Broadcasting Wild Fowl at Night,” *Radio Times*, 23 January 23, 1925, 197-8.

⁷⁷ Reith, *Broadcast*, 152.

programmes was a certain mystical belief in nature and especially in birdsong as its guardian narrator.

E. Kay Robinson, the announcer of the May 1924 nightingale broadcasts, had contributed to the popularisation of British nature observation and enjoyment with his *Daily Mail* columns from 1903 to 1906, and with his penny-weekly *Country-Side* which he edited from 1908 until 1919. What underpinned his work was a desire to understand the ‘harmonious rhythm of the great machine which we call Nature’⁷⁸ and he described his search for the meaning of life thus: ‘to look through Nature up to Nature’s God’.⁷⁹ Robinson grappled to bring the cruel world of nature and God’s goodness into rational harmony.⁸⁰ On the wireless, Robinson gave eighteen talks, in 1923 and 1924, rich in the sensory impressions of nature, which Reith liked enough to collect in the new Broadcast Library Series with a very personal introduction from himself.⁸¹ A less conventional and rather more mystical belief in nature’s powers at this time can be found in *The Charm of Birds*, a best-selling book shaped around birdsong, written by Edward Grey, the long-standing British Foreign Secretary who had served throughout WWI.⁸² Grey had found solace in the unchanging beauty of the seasons during the war: ‘I felt that a great power of Nature was not affected by the War. It was like a great sanctuary into which we could go and find refuge’.⁸³ Grey found security in the beauty and order he heard in birdsong. While he did not declare a spiritual belief in nature himself, the thought hovers in his closing chapter.⁸⁴ Even scientists like Max Nicholson, the leading ornithologist of the 1920s, declared a ‘magic power’ in the voice of birds. His devotion was ‘something near a religion, and after all its externals have been inventoried the essence stays incommunicable’, he wrote.⁸⁵

Nature mediated by wireless broadcasting took on its own kind of magic, and by association, the medium was touched by a similar aura. The radio set could bring nature’s sounds tamed into the home, domesticated, yet still strange and wonderful. Before the nightingale broadcast, the world of wireless radio was full of the excitements of the potential of microphones, transmitters and electromagnetic waves to reveal mysteries. Peter Eckersley anticipated that his team’s technical expertise would be able to portray nature unadorned in the ‘howls of owls, the raving of ravens,

⁷⁸ E. Kay Robinson, *The Country Day by Day* (London: William Heinemann, 1905), vii.

⁷⁹ E. Kay Robinson, *The Meaning of Life* (London: Hampton Wick, 1916). Robinson introduces the strapline ‘A Monthly Journal for Those who Try to Look through Nature up to Nature’s God’.

⁸⁰ E. Kay Robinson, *Religion of Nature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), 205-10.

⁸¹ E. Kay Robinson, *At Home With Nature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924).

⁸² Grey, *The Charm of Birds*, vii. Stephen Moss claims its status as a best-seller in *A Bird in the Hand*, 108.

⁸³ Edward Grey, *Fallodon Papers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 79.

⁸⁴ Grey, *The Charm of Birds*, 234.

⁸⁵ E. M. Nicholson, *The Art of Birdwatching: A Practical Guide to Field Observation* (London: Witherby, 1931), 213.

the chaff of the chaffinch, the grouching of the grouse and the wheezing of weasels'.⁸⁶ Such excitement was mirrored by advances in 'ultra-microphone' developments which brought the possibility of "conversations" with ants and bees'.⁸⁷ The BBC had its own purpose-built microphone commissioned and installed in its Savoy Hill studio in 1923, the highly sensitive Marconi-Sykes magnetophone. Arthur Burrows wrote that 'the story of this microphone [...] is itself one of the romances of wireless'.⁸⁸ This kind of romance harked back to the nineteenth century when the development of the microphone was accompanied by wonderment about what this new device might reveal about the natural world, hitherto beyond the reaches of the ear. In 1878, William Preece, the electrician of the British Post Office, had declared about the microphone: 'I have heard myself the tramp of a little fly across a box with a tread almost as loud as that of a horse across a wooden bridge'.⁸⁹ And a *Spectator* report on this new device looked forward to the chance 'to hear the sap rise in the tree; to hear it rushing against small obstacles to its rise, as a brook rushes against stones in its path; to hear the bee suck honey from the flower; to hear the rush of blood through the smallest of blood-vessels'.⁹⁰

In this is the idea that nature's teeming energy could be revealed by the microphone and broadcast for all to hear and marvel at for the first time. These new electrical media, some might have said, would allow listeners to more closely appreciate God's work manifest in the tiny details that could now be heard. This meant that broadcasting was more than a conveyor of man-made culture. It was revelatory – a power that Reith and many others found to be necessary for truly uplifting public service broadcasting. The nightingale song had been cast in the same light, as a moment in broadcasting where minds could tune out of the known and reflect, rest, and allow bigger thoughts and sensations to appear. The next section develops these ideas, taking the lead again from Reith who believed that broadcasting might complement human senses in revealing not just the sounds of birds, sap and insects but the resonances of the universe itself.

⁸⁶ Burrows, 'Broadcasting the Nightingale', 428.

⁸⁷ 'When Will Insects Broadcast? The Ultra-Microphone and Its Wonders', *Radio Times*, 14 March, 1924, 442.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Baird, 'Capturing the Song of the Nightingale'.

⁸⁹ W. H. Preece, 'The Phonograph', *Journal of the Society of the Arts* 26 (1878).

⁹⁰ 'The Microphone', *Spectator*, 25 May, 1878, 10.

In touch with cosmic harmony

In this section, I broaden the analysis to encompass a bigger picture of nature, beyond the homely natural history of the nation's gardens, parks and meadows. I want to explore John Reith's vision of the kind of nature to which he gave a capital 'N', to see how he conceived that radio broadcasting could be part of an extended scheme of human communication with the heavens, not simply the earth-bound. The discussion will move on from listening to the sounds and stories of nature, to the speculative yet resonant ideas of Reith and others of the *medium* of electromagnetic radio waves as a part of nature itself. The argument here will be that wireless broadcasting was envisioned to connect listeners' minds to the harmonies of the universe, nature in its grandest and most spiritual state. Radio was a conduit through which divine stillness and silence could be channelled to humans. These ideas perhaps emerged as part of an urge to attach a secular theology to broadcasting, as religion in Britain declined, and they may have been seen as a way to normalise radio by associating it with the natural, dissipating the fears that all new mass communication technologies could bring forth. These ideas were certainly energised by the thrill of broadcasting's potential to do public good.⁹¹

Reith's programme schedule began to feature the topics of physics and cosmology, together with biology and natural history, as the 1920s progressed. The natural world, so often understood at this time through the biological evolution of Charles Darwin, was complemented by the wider historical dimension of cosmological evolution, which had become part of public knowledge and imagination by the time the BBC began broadcasting.⁹² Before WWI the discovery of radioactivity and the electron were widely reported in popular media, and *Punch* regularly carried cartoons about radium, radio and the electron.⁹³ Peter Bowler points out that after the war, Albert Einstein's name was well-known, while his visit to Britain in 1921 revived again press and public interest in his complex theoretical physics.⁹⁴ The physics of the very small jostled with the cosmology of the very large in the public mind. What all this meant was that conceptions of the natural physical world could be comforting and homely, extraordinary and unfamiliar, or mind-bendingly abstract, but in this mix the public were exposed to all sorts of ideas about the microcosm and macrocosm of their world and of the universe. Such ideas were not necessarily unsettling. The reassurances

⁹¹ Avery argues that Reith felt a moral duty to promote his 'Christian ethics' as a necessary part of citizenship and national culture: *Radio Modernism*, 7-19.

⁹² Peter Bowler, *Science for All: The Popularisation of Science in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34-5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

given by Einstein to the Archbishop of Canterbury that his theory had no implications for religion was a signal that science would cooperate with religion as it so often had, and it was also a reminder that faith could become ‘ever more cosmopolitan’, as Leigh Eric Schmidt has put it, in the presence of rational ideology.⁹⁵

The BBC was part of this conversation. In the summer of 1924, Reith gave away his front-page *Radio Times* feature to a biologist whose work sought to reconcile science and religion. Professor J. Arthur Thomson was a Scot for whom nature was the scene of divine activity. He was probably the best-known popular science writer and lecturer in the country.⁹⁶ Thomson’s radio programmes used the vocabulary of wonderment: *Animals That Work Miracles*; *Wonders of Underground Life*; *Marvels of Bird Migration*; *The Drama of Animal Life*.⁹⁷ This is popular science communication at work, but it also acknowledges the unknowable and spiritual domains of nature’s operation. Thomson and other leading scientists, including Julian Huxley, were interested in Henri Bergson’s ideas of a non-material force of ‘creative evolution’ in nature, with a potentially moral purpose.⁹⁸ Reith’s *Radio Times* front-page was promulgating ideas that he would have taken great interest in. The science and technology of radio broadcasting relied on non-material forces too and Reith was keen to link these to the spiritual if possible. His own writing makes efforts to do this, but there were others who took up these themes.

Making contact

Arthur Burrows, for example, imagined the possibility that through wireless vibrations ‘new points of contact with other realms of creation’ might be possible. ‘What surprises may be in store on the other side of silence? [...] the love-songs of butterflies?’, he wondered.⁹⁹ But the poet Alfred Noyes went further when he spoke of broadcasting as a miracle medium that reaches into the universe. ‘The churches are beginning to preach from their pulpits that the age of miracles is over, and that all miracles are myths’, he wrote in *Radio and the Master-Secret*, published in the *Radio Times* in 1925, ‘at the very moment when science itself has revealed the whole universe to be an everlasting miracle’. Radio waves, Noyes said, were as Wordsworth described, ‘a spirit that [...] rolls through all things’. Broadcasting was proof that ‘the

⁹⁵ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 238.

⁹⁶ Bowler, *Science for All*, 233.

⁹⁷ *Radio Times*, June to September, 1924.

⁹⁸ Bowler, *Science for All*, 44-8.

⁹⁹ Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting*, 178. Burrows borrows from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*: ‘If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.’

Supreme Power was in communication with every part of the universe'.¹⁰⁰ There is quite a lot to take in here. In essence, Noyes has made the claim that radio waves were a miraculous work of God and they carried his messages across the universe. Reith's thinking is here, though Noyes has expressed it more vividly than Reith, who was not prepared to go quite as far.

Reith's *Broadcast Over Britain* indeed reveals some of his deepest beliefs and hopes for wireless broadcasting. Looking again at his chapter 'In Touch with the Infinite', Reith elaborates his thought, or wish, that somehow wireless radio offered a chance for humans to make contact with the unbounded cosmos and in so doing unite humans:

Broadcasting may help to show that mankind is a unity and that the mighty heritage, material, moral and spiritual, if meant for the good of any, is meant for the good of all, and this is conveyed in its operations. So our desire is that we may send broadcast through the ether, which is universal, the universality of all that is good in whatsoever line we may; and so all may receive without let of hindrance, and without encumbrance or care.¹⁰¹

In his pulpit tone, Reith puts forward something of his vision of broadcasting for all humans – that it is a unifying force of electromagnetic waves travelling through space, without limits or barriers, distributing goodness. But for this arrangement to work Reith introduced into his argument the ether, a substance that filled the universe, connecting all matter and making wireless accessible to all.

The ether was a long-standing concept in scientific thought, but physicist Sir Oliver Lodge had popularised the idea of a substance that would 'weld' atoms together in space, transmitting vibrations from one piece of matter to another.¹⁰² Lodge contended that wireless could only function in the presence of ether because this was the medium through which radio waves travelled. More ornately, the ether was central to the 'romance of wireless' because it is a 'vehicle for messages', as Lodge put it.¹⁰³ Lodge was a major public figure in early twentieth-century Britain, a Victorian pioneer of wireless communication, the scientific advisor for a leading magazine for amateur wireless enthusiasts, *Popular Wireless*, and a charismatic writer and BBC broadcaster. In 1925 he hosted a seven-part radio series that started with 'The Mystery of the

¹⁰⁰ Alfred Noyes, "Radio and the Master-Secret," *Radio Times*, 18 September 18, 1925, 550. D. L. LeMahieu argues that this article by Noyes is part of the BBC's campaign to emphasise the social and cultural benefits of the novel medium of communication, to gain legitimacy with the public, a phase that tailed off from 1927: (*A Culture for Democracy*, 180-2).

¹⁰¹ Reith, *Broadcast*, 218-9.

¹⁰² Oliver Lodge, *Ether and Reality: A Series of Discourses on the Many Functions of the Ether of Space* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), 154.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 236.

Ether', which featured on Reith's front page of the *Radio Times*.¹⁰⁴ Yet Lodge's ether theory had been largely undermined by Einsteinian physics, which had no need for an etheric substance for electromagnetic waves to act in the universe. Reith would have been well aware of this, nevertheless he and others found the metaphors wrapped up in the ether appealing and useful. 'Wireless is in particular league with the ether', Reith wrote, and he revelled in its mystery.¹⁰⁵ Ether was employed to explain telepathy, experiments about which were hosted by Reith and Lodge on the BBC in 1927.¹⁰⁶ Apart from being a medium that might allow minds to communicate silently, the invisible ether carried connotations of the clear blue sky, the heavens beyond, the pure essence breathed by the ancient Gods, and none of this was lost on Reith.

Connecting to harmony

The ether made coherent what would otherwise be chaos. In *Talks about Wireless* Lodge wrote: 'the ether welds the worlds together into a cosmic system of law and order.' The ether resisted disorder to ensure the universe was held in a state of stillness and perfection. It provided poise and equilibrium. Lodge saw a social as well as a cosmic function: 'Let it weld all humanity together, so they can face their common difficulties in a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust!'¹⁰⁷ There is correspondence here between Reith and Lodge, in what they see as a moral purpose for radio in bringing the world closer together in peace.¹⁰⁸ Reith looks forward to 'world-unity' and 'peace on earth' at the end of his book,¹⁰⁹ and in 1927 when he became director general of the Corporation he put forward the motto 'Nation shall speak peace unto nation'. Drawn from scripture, perhaps with the war still in mind, these words capture the ideal of a softly-spoken global broadcasting of fellowship. Reith saw musical programming as an international language, one that would advance peaceful unity, an idea that points to the harmony to be found in the notion of the 'music of the spheres', where each celestial body contributed a unique tone to a great harmonic assembly.¹¹⁰ Reith could conceive perhaps that broadcasting would bring the world together to participate in a universal song of creation.

The mystery of the ether and the mystery of broadcasting would not be deciphered by humans, Reith was certain. These things were quite beyond human senses and

¹⁰⁴ *Radio Times*, January to March, 1925.

¹⁰⁵ Reith, *Broadcast*, 223.

¹⁰⁶ Enns, *Psychic Radio*, 144-5.

¹⁰⁷ Oliver Lodge, *Talks about Wireless: With some Pioneering History and some Hints and Calculations for Wireless Amateurs* (London: Cassell, 1925), 243.

¹⁰⁸ Peters has argued that the vision of a universe held together by a transcendent, invisible principle of order (the ether) was an idea that resonated with a conservative social outlook: *Speaking Into the Air*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Reith, *Broadcast*, 222.

¹¹⁰ Penelope Gouk, 'The Harmonic Roots of Newtonian Science', in *Let Newton Be!* eds., J. Fauvel, R. Flood, M. Shortland and R. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 102-25.

knowledge.¹¹¹ Following Lodge, Reith asserted that human senses were ‘painfully inefficient’ in detecting the ‘vast ranges of vibrations with things happening that we cannot get in touch with’.¹¹² Indeed, the last page of *Broadcast Over Britain* makes clear that these human shortcomings should be accepted, and that spiritual contemplation was the route to enlightenment:

We should also be aware of the feebleness and errors of our own perceptions and intelligence, and from this awareness, turn to the contemplation of the Omnipotence holding all things together by word of power, in Whom, as in the ether, we live and move and have our being.¹¹³

This is as close a Reith comes to placing his God into the picture of broadcasting. Nevertheless, it is clear he believed that the BBC could be a public service that included a mystical religious dimension. The best of everything would include access to if not communication with the heavenly presence. The formulation that has emerged in this analysis of Reith’s thinking can be summarised in a rough linear flow as follows: Minds > Ears > Radio > Waves > Ether > Cosmos > God. This oversimplification of what many who were close to broadcasting had in mind shows at least that what might be on offer was a touch or contact with the divine, rather than communication. If a dialogue was conceived, the onus in this model was on the listener to seek and sense connection.

At the distant end of that connection was the bounty of heavenly grace, part of which was the sound of silence. When Reith wrote about the significance of broadcasting the nightingale’s song he had invoked the ‘many voices of Nature’ as bringing a special kind of ‘silence’ to the lives of his city-dwelling listeners. However, it seems to me that the most pure and perfect silence was not the one that birdsong could inspire, but that associated with the infinite. There was nothing to fear in this immense silence, instead it might offer ‘the companionship of solitude’.¹¹⁴ Though Lodge and many others sought an exchange through the ether with the dead after the war, Reith’s infinite was not a place of hauntings.¹¹⁵ The silence was associated with contemplation, transformation of the self, prayer and connection with God. A silent creator overseeing a silent universe was a story of scripture and of Western culture.¹¹⁶ Reith wanted to somehow draw that silence into his broadcasting system, an electronic medium of pops, whooshes and puzzling groans though it was. Wilfred Whitten

¹¹¹ Reith, *Broadcast*, 223–4.

¹¹² Reith, ‘Broadcasting Silence’, *Radio Times*, 6 June, 1924, 348.

¹¹³ Reith, *Broadcast*, 224.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹¹⁵ Lodge published *Raymond or Life and Death* in 1916, an account of his communication with his son who had died in WWI. See W. P. Jolly, *Oliver Lodge* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 205.

¹¹⁶ See MacCulloch, *Silence*, 223–4; Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 116–153.

commended the rare commodity of silence in modern life to the readers of *John O'London's Weekly*. He said that people longed for 'the silence in which the greatest sounds can be heard more abundantly', especially 'the whispers both of earth and heaven'.¹¹⁷ Stillness for him was a virtue, a magnificent hush that could herald revelation.

The more prosaic Sunday schedule of religious observance was a terrestrial source of silence accessible more easily to everyday listeners. Reith located the most important part of Sunday broadcasting in a change of pace, as much as a change in content. The rhythm needed to be stepped down in tempo and there needed to be less on air to allow citizens to attend church services. There were no transmissions at all 'in Church Hours' on Sunday morning, then just 'two hours of music in the afternoon', and 'then nothing till eight or half-past' in the evening when there was a 'short service sent out from all the studios', or every month or so a complete church service that carried the atmosphere of the church, including its bells.¹¹⁸ Broadcasting was in large part silenced. Wireless sets could be switched off.¹¹⁹ Reith summarised the effect of this carefully limited day on the air in this way:

Apart from any puritanical nonsense, I believe that Sabbaths should be one of the invaluable assets of our existence – "quiet islands on the tossing sea of life". It only requires a little thought to determine how best they may be employed, and how turned to greatest advantage. This is not to be achieved by sport or motoring or parading about the streets. It is a sad reflection on human intelligence if recreation is only to be found in the distractions of excitement – if no provisions are to be made for re-creation of the mind and refreshment of the spirit; the spirit is surely of at least as much moment as the body, and many of the ills of the latter are attributable to the neglect of the former.¹²⁰

It seems that Reith acknowledged that some may not benefit from strict religious protocols and messages, but all needed and enjoyed a break from work-a-day routines, including listening to the wireless. Peace and contentment could be found in the communion with the right quiet pursuits, although we are left to wonder what exactly Reith would prescribe if he could.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Whitten, 'Pray Silence', 517-8.

¹¹⁸ Reith, *Broadcast*, 196-7.

¹¹⁹ Lacey has argued that for a public broadcaster devoted to the listener's self-improvement, silence was part of the scheduled flow of the week, not just a Sunday convention: *Listening Publics*, 82. The BBC included silent broadcasting breaks of about 15 minutes between programmes throughout the week, to allow listeners to switch off or contemplate what they had heard or what they were just about to hear.

¹²⁰ Reith, *Broadcast*, 196.

¹²¹ Briggs singles out the religious policy of the 1920s as 'standing out against the many of the tendencies of the age': *The Golden Age*, 7.

Normalising radio with nature

While Reith made efforts to spiritualise the medium, lifting it towards heaven, there were at the same time efforts by the BBC to normalise the medium through associations with nature, to anchor it. There was a balance created here, perhaps unintentionally, in that broadcasting was cast as simultaneously transcendent and a part of the everyday. Broadcasting could be both. However, the normalisation of radio by associating it with nature was not simply a matter of relating the medium to everyday terrestrial nature, though this happened; radio was also related to the powerful atmospheric forces surrounding the earth.

The first BBC director of programmes, Arthur Burrows, like Reith, published an account of the first 18 months of broadcasting. In his preface to *The Story of Broadcasting* Burrows was keen straightaway to associate broadcasting directly with nature's vibrational energy:

Nature has been "broadcasting" since the earliest thunderstorm. With the first lightning flash, wireless waves were sent rippling across space, penetrating primaeval forests, rocky caverns and the haunts of such animal life as then existed.

Man himself has been broadcasting for over a quarter of a century, using harnessed forces of nature and the wonderful discoveries of Senatore Marconi and other workers in the same field. These wireless waves, like those born of the earliest thunderstorm, have been passing quietly though our homes and our bodies. To us they have meant nothing.

The wireless station from which these waves originated has been viewed as a mystic place, having less bearing on the affairs of the man in the street than an astronomical observatory.

To-day the position is entirely changed [...] every other person is now discussing broadcasting or some item in the broadcast programmes.¹²²

Burrows here suggests that broadcasting through the ether is an entirely benign process that nature itself has always been doing. There was certainly nothing to fear from wireless radio waves 'passing quietly through' homes and bodies, now an everyday event. Burrows deferred to nature's comforting age-old processes to defuse any anxieties that wireless broadcasting might be a threat to human bodies and minds. This kind of narrative was a response to, Burrows freely admitted, 'the quite common case of persons complaining that broadcasting was injuring their health'. Even if electromagnetic waves were part of the way the earth's systems worked, man-

¹²² Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting*, no pagination.

made radio waves were cause for concern. Some had reported that birds were seen to drop dead in their hundreds when flying in line with wireless waves.¹²³ *Popular Wireless* too had reported, light-heartedly, that gulls and doves could lose their direction-finding senses because of 'some effect of the ether waves not yet understood'.¹²⁴ There was speculation that the ever-increasing use of wireless broadcasting might affect weather conditions and climate more generally, through its disturbance of the ether.¹²⁵ It was small wonder that these concerns emerged, because the knowledge that wireless waves did indeed pulse across the planet and throughout the heavens, at the unimaginable speed of light, gave pause for thought to anyone who pondered such things.

These anxieties were countered enthusiastically by the BBC and others, not by arguing that wireless was safe, but by insisting that wireless was good for you.¹²⁶ *Radio Times* and *Popular Wireless* bustled with articles and letters about 'wireless healing'. Children listening to wireless were 'more contented and robust', perhaps through 'atomic electricity [...] picking up some unknown force in its transmission on the ether waves and delivering them to the recipient', one writer wondered.¹²⁷ A medical correspondent told of the 'life-giving wave-lengths' that improved colour and boosted the spirits by direct action on the central nervous system reached through listener's headphones.¹²⁸ Wireless listening offered a 'rest cure' for the run-down.¹²⁹ In the summer of 1925, the BBC engaged several authoritative voices to get the message across in the *Radio Times*. For example, Sir Bruce Bruce-Porter, KBE, CMG, MD was given the front page for his reassuring article 'Health and Headphones',¹³⁰ and Lord Knutsford in 'Wireless for the Wards' announced a new initiative to get wireless installed at the bedside in all London hospitals.¹³¹ If radio waves were part of the normal workings of nature, then it could be argued that wireless was not a threat but health-giving. Reith and Burrows had in their own ways constructed stories about the benevolent psychic architecture of broadcasting, led by their enthusiasm for the new venture as well as the need to legitimate the service.

Many others took part in the promotion of the notion of wireless waves as part of nature. 'What is more *natural* than wireless?' asked a writer in up-market magazine

¹²³ Ibid., 75.

¹²⁴ 'Come, Birdy, Come!', *Popular Wireless*, 3 June, 1922, 7.

¹²⁵ P. J. Risdon, 'Nature's Wireless', *Popular Wireless*, 22 March, 1924, 123.

¹²⁶ Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting*, 122.

¹²⁷ Letter, 'Does Listening Promote Health?', *Radio Times*, 23 November, 1923, 320.

¹²⁸ 'Wireless and Health. How Listening Affects Your Well-Being', *Radio Times*, 11 January, 1924, 82.

¹²⁹ 'Radio Rest Cures', *Popular Wireless*, 19 April, 1924, 262.

¹³⁰ Sir Bruce Bruce-Porter, 'Health and Headphones', *Radio Times*, 31 July, 1925, 1.

¹³¹ Lord Knutsford, 'Wireless for the Wards', *Radio Times*, 5 June, 1925, 504.

The Broadcaster. He continued, 'sight, sound, heat and light are all wireless'.¹³² Staff writer J. F. Corrigan, in his May 1926 feature 'Aerials in Miniature', drew direct parallels between 'ether vibrations' set up by wireless broadcasts and those by 'insect wireless'. Radio science had potentially answered how insects communicated silently with each other using ether waves transmitted and received through their antennae or 'feelers'.¹³³ An intriguing feature article appeared in *Popular Wireless* in 1923 which showed the enthusiast how to make a loudspeaker from a seashell (Figure 13).¹³⁴ Radio enthusiasts may be 'essentially modernists', the piece said, but they would do well to experiment with one of nature's loudspeakers – 'the despised ornament of the Victorian home is really an ideal component for the most scientific instrument'. The guide showed how to drill out and fit a headphone earpiece and as a result the seashell was found to be 'remarkable for its mellow tone and clear reproduction of both music and speech'. That a soft, pure sound should emerge from a shell that had previously had the eternal murmur of the ocean trapped inside it seemed entirely logical, in a strange and not-very-scientific way. There was also a pleasing symmetry in wireless' natural waves being shaped and relayed to listeners through the curvaceous aperture of a seashell, whose aesthetics, in turn, off-set the harsh appearance of the receiving apparatus.

Thinking of wireless broadcasting as part of nature lent the medium the enchantments that were found in the natural world, great and small. Burrows found himself ruminating on the molecules, atoms and electrons that made up a single morning dewdrop. He looked to the heavens on a cloudless night, 'across a boundless space, to other worlds, each one of which, suspended by an invisible agency and spinning like a golden top, pursues in silent motion an endless well-defined course'.¹³⁵ Here is the peace and stillness that Reith perceived, Burrows noting its perfection undisturbed by wireless waves and vibrations. Here is the orderly pattern of nature, bounded by its own laws, which broadcasting was part of. When Burrows talks of the 'mysterious' ether, he is talking of a beauty too great for humans to comprehend. The ether is part of a natural order of planetary movements, earthly season cycles, fluxes of light and darkness, tidal forces, and sap rising and falling.¹³⁶ In Burrows's account of the first 18 months of BBC broadcasting, wireless is depicted as something natural but at the same time part of the greater mystery of the cosmic infinite and all the more powerful

¹³² Lewis J. Ferrars, 'How We Wireless', *The Broadcaster*, June 1923, 46.

¹³³ J. F. Corrigan, 'Aerials in Miniature', *Wireless World*, 1 May, 1926, 385-6. Note that insect antennae were soon shown to do no such thing – they were chiefly touch organs. For another example of nature's wireless see E. de Poynton, 'A Mystery of the Animal World. Nature's Own Wireless', *Radio Times*, 12 December, 1924, 526.

¹³⁴ 'A Sea Shell Loud Speaker', *Popular Wireless*, 24 November, 1923, 471.

¹³⁵ Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting*, 1, 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

and exciting for it. Broadcasting is extraordinary, like so many other natural forces of creation.

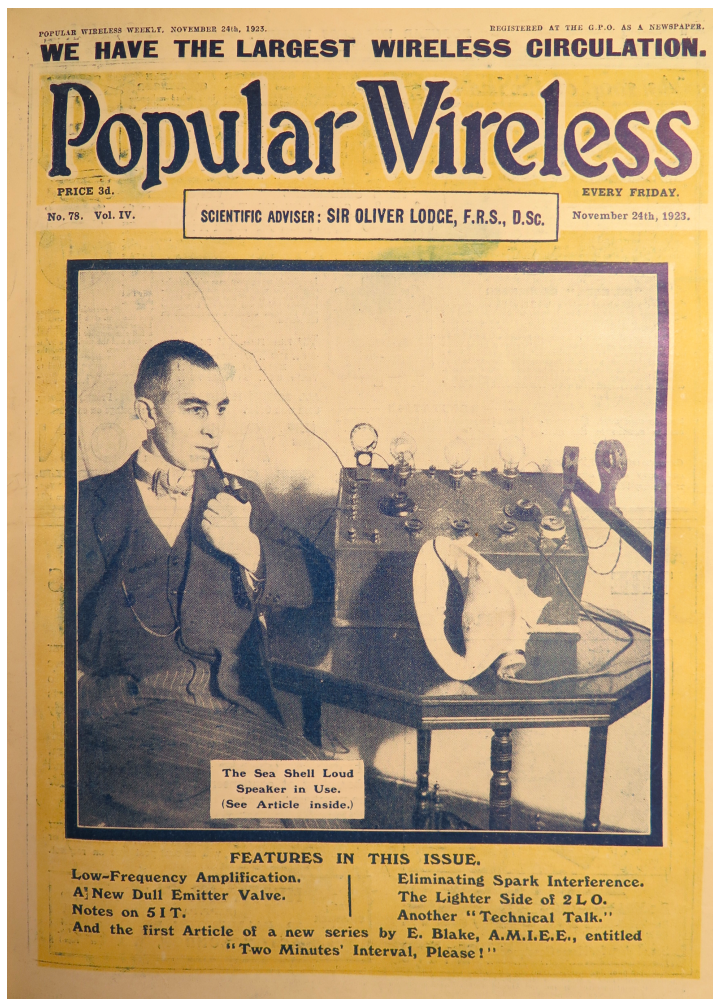


Figure 13. The cover of *Popular Wireless* showing how a large seashell could be rigged-up to act as a loudspeaker (*Popular Wireless*, 24 November, 1923).

Listening outdoors, in nature

In the early years of the BBC's work, broadcasting was also normalised by promoting listening as a complement to popular outdoor pursuits. During the first summers of BBC broadcasting, the *Radio Times* and wireless magazines were taken with the idea that wireless listening could happen anywhere (Figure 14). It was quite possible, readers were informed, to take the wireless with you – out into the garden, on picnics or to the seaside – to enjoy the glories of the summer while keeping in touch with the news or a concert.¹³⁷ Wireless set manufacturers conjured the appeal of listening to the wireless while driving or boating. While some of this was certainly a marketing effort,

¹³⁷ See Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 118–9.

for the BBC to keep listeners listening and for set manufacturers to keep receivers moving out of the shops,¹³⁸ there was more at stake.

The Broadcaster columnist Russell Mallinson wrote about all kinds of people listening outdoors – the many who might have a cheap and compact crystal set, or the more well-off who might own a bulky valve set that needed heavy batteries.¹³⁹ Valve sets were hardly portable and would need a motor car to be able to get them out into the countryside.¹⁴⁰ Modern suburban families had to be catered for by broadcasting and they were part of the imagery of radio listening within summertime nature.¹⁴¹ Radio might be a social glue for the family; ‘The programme has to get into the home atmosphere’, wrote Cecil Lewis, who worked alongside Arthur Burrows.¹⁴² It was imagined that this kind of family normality could be reconstituted by the seaside or under the shade of a tree with a picnic. For those who could afford it, Western Electric ran a series of glamorous full-page advertisements showing their ‘wireless receiving apparatus’ aboard a yacht under sail, as part of a lazy river punt and in the garden beside a game of tennis. These were fantasies of a mobile future where wireless was always to hand, projections of the happy habit of wireless listening. They were also a reflection of the fashionable status of listening and being *seen* to be listening in, a new public performance.¹⁴³

Listening to the radio in the countryside was part of a broad social communion with the landscape that was gaining pace at this time. Camping, youth hostelling and rambling were notable activities that made use of the countryside for leisure, pleasure and an assertion of English identity, though the Youth Hostels Association and the Nation Council for Ramblers’ Associations were not formalised until 1930.¹⁴⁴ Camping after the war was seen as a healthy outdoor pursuit of the type needed for ‘invigorating and healing jaded minds and bodies’.¹⁴⁵ Radios were not central to camping culture by any means; in fact many people were seeking to escape the mechanised habits of urban life. Yet there were reports of charabanc trips into the countryside that would

¹³⁸ Summer was a slack period for receiver sales. See Keith Geddes, *The Setmakers: A History of the Radio and Television Industry* (London: BREMA, 1991), 38.

¹³⁹ Russell Mallinson, ‘The Sunny Side of Radio’, *The Broadcaster*, August 1923, 18.

¹⁴⁰ Jonathan Hill suggests these machines could weigh up to 35 kg: *Radio! Radio!* (Bampton: Sunrise, 1986), 54. However, the basic crystal set reigned supreme over the significantly more expensive valve set for the first five years of BBC broadcasting: Geddes, *The Setmakers*, 16.

¹⁴¹ Though wireless could be more a source of domestic strife than harmony, the BBC wanted the listening habit to restore a more rational use of leisure time and preserve the ideology of home, health and family, so important, it thought, to the nation: Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 358–369. See also Michael Bailey, ‘The Angel in the Ether. Early Radio and the Constitution of the Household’, in *Narrating Media History*, ed. Michael Bailey (London: Routledge, 2009), 52–65.

¹⁴² Quoted in Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 369.

¹⁴³ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 37.

¹⁴⁴ Colls, *Identity of England*, 224.

¹⁴⁵ W. M. Childs, *Holidays in Tents* (London: J. M. Dent, 1921), 27.

entertain 'the masses' with wireless broadcasting: 'In Lancashire these juggernauts of the highway are in many cases fitted with radio receiving sets, which through the medium of a loud speaker, broadcast concerts to the passengers during country runs'.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps in such collisions of nature excursion and wireless listening can be seen the ideas of romance of the English rural scene matched with the romance of radio, the latter so often invoked in the first years of broadcasting. Reith had commented on the romance of radio when explaining the effect of the nightingale broadcast on the nation, as so many journalists did;¹⁴⁷ Lodge had used it when writing about the ether; and department store magnate Harry Gordon Selfridge announced in *Popular Wireless* that 'romance, after all, is the spice of life, and in the radiophone receiver we have romance personified'.¹⁴⁸ The romance of the British nature idyll and that of the wireless seemed to go together.

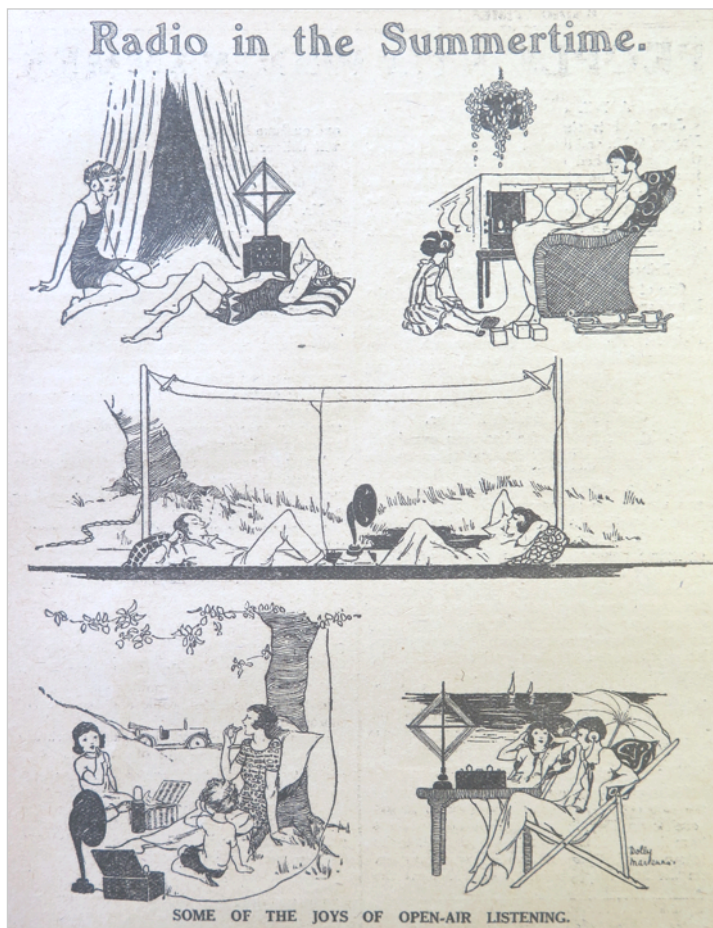


Figure 14. Some possibilities for listening outdoors (*Radio Times*, 15 May, 1925, 343).

¹⁴⁶ Sinclair Russell, 'The Radio Pipes of Pan', *The Broadcaster*, July, 1923, 59. Many commentators, C. E. M. Joad most notably, saw this kind of movement as an invasion of the countryside by the vulgar noisy masses. The social battle for the countryside has been well-described. See for example Gardiner, *The Thirties*, 243-56; Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 46-92; Agar, 'Bodies, Machines, Noise'.

¹⁴⁷ Reith, 'The Broadcasting of Silence', 437. For an example of the use of the word 'romantic', see a reflection in 1930 on the first years of broadcasting: Hervey Elwes, 'Five Years' Broadcasting', *Vox*, 11 January, 1930, 334.

¹⁴⁸ Gordon Selfridge, 'Mr Selfridge Expresses his Views', *Popular Wireless*, 3 June, 1922, 7.

The paradox of listening that this conjunction created could not be avoided, however. This was because whether listening to the wireless outdoors with headphones or a loudspeaker, both modes obliterated the possibility of engaging with nature's own soundtrack. Although it may have been the case that having nature at one's disposal while being immersed in the modern mode of wireless participation, in public, was the best of both worlds. The journalist Sinclair Russell saw wireless music as entirely complementary to the mood of the rural scene. There could be dancing by day and by moonlight, and he predicted that 'the breezy expanses of the Norfolk Broads this summer will resound to the echoes of loud speakers on yachts and wherries'.¹⁴⁹ Another writer was charmed by the prospect of wireless music for 'healthy recreation' from the 'turmoil of the cities', 'challenging the night owls amidst the verdant beauties of some forest clearing'.¹⁵⁰ This unlikely drama was explained by a belief that nature's own green acoustics were particularly flattering to many sounds, including wireless music:

For the silence of a garden brings a new charm to music and voices which makes one forget the intricacies of the science of acoustics. One might as well adapt such theories to the song of a lark or the warbling notes of a nightingale. And here perhaps nature has created a scheme of her own. For it may be that the grass, the foliage and the trees have a subtle power to enhance the beauty of music with acoustics that nature has provided.¹⁵¹

In this imagining, wireless had been completely accommodated by the natural world. More, broadcasting belonged in nature because it sounded better there. There was no reason why the song of the lark could not be heard in harmony with wireless sounds. After all, the nightingale's sweet song had been brought by wireless into homes around Britain, the sound of the country brought into the city. Why then should the sounds of man and his music not be sent into the countryside to mingle with the sounds of nature? This exchange dissolved any tensions that wireless listening might have and placed the new medium comfortably in home and outdoor listening arenas as a national instrument of public service.

¹⁴⁹ Russell, 'The Radio Pipes of Pan', 60.

¹⁵⁰ Russell Mallinson, 'Radio and the Broad Highway', *The Broadcaster*, June, 1923, 24.

¹⁵¹ Mallinson, 'The Sunny Side of Radio', 18.

Conclusion

The very first broadcast sounds that emerged from the wireless in 1922 were heard to be nature calling out from the ether. ‘Many people first heard the wild waves calling through the earphones of a crystal set’, Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff have said in their social history of broadcasting.¹⁵² Well before John Reith planned the live broadcast of a nightingale singing with Beatrice Harrison’s cello from the Surrey woods, the airwaves were alive with aerial mysteries. The sound of the air, of wind, of water as well as the uncanny murmurs of spirits were the first to be recognised by expectant listeners. All these appeared to be the sounds of nature, or the supernatural. The nightingale broadcast is well-known still in popular culture, though little explored in scholarly work, and it has re-surfaced in recent years to be portrayed by the BBC as a charming and idiosyncratic moment in its history. But it is much more than this. In the establishment of the BBC’s public service, the sound of the nightingale on the wireless was at once symbolic of the enchantment that modern life was missing but that broadcasting could supply, and it was part of a scheme Reith gradually evolved with others to spiritualise both the content and medium of broadcasting.

Reith can be thought of as a ‘gentleman farmer’ in his work as a public service broadcaster. The term ‘broadcasting’ connotes the cultivation of nature by the scattering of seed, a metaphor that Reith formalised in social practice as the free distribution of culture worth nurturing and propagating further.¹⁵³ But Reith wanted this broadcasting of culture to be more than human voices and music. His religious commitments demanded more of him. Something sublime was needed, and the iconic sound of the nightingale provided this, a signal from deep within British nature’s microcosm. ‘The best of everything’ needed surprises like this that appealed to all classes and tastes. It is likely that Reith and Burrows were experimenting at this very early stage, and it required the significant public response to the nightingale broadcast for Reith to place the event and its possibilities within his philosophy for public service broadcasting. The nightingale communicated a silence craved by urban dwellers all over Britain, Reith argued. The silence that was needed was a comforting stillness and pause that could counter the rush of modern lives and the perceived psychic fragility after war. The sounds of nature were compatible with the kind of

¹⁵² Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 356.

¹⁵³ Peters has discussed the possible origins of the term broadcasting: *Speaking Into the Air*, 207. Whitten described Reith as a ‘gentleman farmer’ in his work as a broadcaster: ‘A Word About Mr Broadcast’, *John O’ London’s Weekly*, 13 December, 1924, 433. Eric Gill’s sculpture ‘The Sower’ in the main reception of Broadcasting House, was commissioned by Reith in 1930.

silence that humans needed. Broadcasting was seen to be a tool for improving modern life, and engagement with British nature a way to regain strength to cope with it. The combination was a potent one.

I have argued that Reith attempted to spiritualise the content of his broadcasting in this way, but he also put forward the concept of a flow of etheric connectivity that spiritualised the medium of radio itself. Drawing confidence from physicists, biologists and critics, Reith was one of many who imagined radio waves travelling through the ether, making contact with universal nature and by extension the heavens. God himself was not mentioned, I think to give scope for a broad non-denominational nature theology to be wrapped around the broadcast medium. The heavenly system was set in place and ordered by the ether, Oliver Lodge argued, which framed the sound that listeners might encounter, should they tune into it, as eternally silent. The possibility that the new broadcasting medium had an intrinsic celestial stillness within its network was deeply appealing to Reith. It meant that, like his Sabbath-day programmes – ‘quiet islands on the tossing sea’ – broadcasting could offer moments of calm, pause for thought. With silence came an opportunity for the experience of revelation. As the Reithian BBC proceeded, ideas of nature’s qualities in macrocosm and microcosm underpinned the evolution of broadcasting and the programming that listeners heard.

If all this thinking was emergent rather than carefully constructed, a more clear-cut plan was seen in the normalising of the medium made of mysterious electromagnetic waves. While the technologies of microphones, transmitters, receivers and loudspeakers had generated public excitement that the hidden sound of nature’s intricate operations would now be revealed, there was anxiety too that radio waves were a health hazard. To counter such concerns, it was argued that the waves, atoms and electrons of broadcasting were natural phenomena that had much in common with thunder and lightning. The idea that radio broadcasting was a friendly partner to nature was most clearly seen in the promotion of summertime outdoor listening for families, campers and music lovers. There was a suggestion in the campaigns from the BBC and wireless magazines that nature was somehow better when radio sounds were present, and that the reverse was also true, that radio sounds, especially music, were sweeter when heard under a tree or in the countryside.

4. Modern birdsong and national identity at war

The mediatisation of birdsong is further explored in this final chapter when the ancient songs of nature are removed from the strictures of time and space to be fixed for consumption with new recording techniques. Gramophone recordings of British birds allowed new kinds of attentive modern listening to take place by experts and a wider public. But during WWII, these recordings also feature in BBC broadcasting as a gentle, commonplace evocation of patriotism, centred around everyday natural heritage, without the clichés of nostalgic ruralist propaganda that listeners reacted against. With human conduct in war under scrutiny, some intellectuals found in birdsong a reminder of softly-spoken civilised modes of behaviour. There are even suggestions that the songs of birds might be capable of civilising a barbaric enemy. These are the arguments I will develop in the course of this chapter, the psychological setting for which, well before war begins, is what Richard Overly has called a state of ‘war psychosis’. This was a state of mind in which the question of the survival or death of contemporary civilisation was at stake.¹

The work of German nature sound recordist Ludwig Koch is the focus here; both his recording work in the late 1930s and his broadcasts throughout the war. Koch’s work has been studied chiefly for its natural history significance, with only Seán Street paying significant attention to his recordings as part of radio’s poetic culture.² Street argues that by the end of the 1940s Koch was a household name and as well-known to the public as David Attenborough is today.³ John Burton, who was in charge of the BBC wildlife sound library at the Natural History Unit from 1962 to 1988, has written about Koch’s work as a foundation of the library’s collection,⁴ and others have looked briefly at how Koch’s recording efforts gave scientists the opportunity to study birdsong in a new way, breaking away from problematic transcription traditions of old.⁵ The aim here is to look at Koch’s work as a cultural endeavour with popular meaning during wartime, while placing it within the framework of the popularisation of birdwatching espoused by public intellectuals like Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson, who collaborated with him. Their ideas about how best to develop knowledge and understanding of birdsong are explored alongside Koch’s own

¹ Overly, *The Morbid Age*, 316, 319. Overly argues that this mood existed without an obvious enemy in mind, though the Spanish Civil War was a catalyst in shaping British attitudes towards contemporary crisis.

² Street, *The Poetry of Radio*, 100-7; Street, *The Memory of Sound: Preserving the Sonic Past* (New York, Routledge, 2015) 123-4.

³ See his radio feature about Koch, *Ludwig Koch and the Music of Nature*, BBC Radio 4, 15 April, 2009, accessed 7 September, 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/archive_pioneers/6505.shtml.

⁴ John Burton, ‘The BBC Natural History Unit Wildlife Sound Library 1948-1988’, *Wildlife Sound* 12 (2012): 19.

⁵ Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 58-60; Bruyninckx, ‘Sound Science. Recording and Listening in the Biology of Bird Song, 1880-1980’.

enthusiasm for birdsong as a pleasure that all Britons could access during the crisis of war.

The publications and broadcasts of Koch, then, are the primary sources used here, alongside those of Huxley and the writings of Nicholson. Documents from the BBC Written Archive, the *Radio Times* and contemporaneous writing about BBC broadcasting are also drawn upon. This exploration concentrates on the use of broadcasting to send birdsong into the homes of the nation at a time when listening attention was newly geared towards keeping safe and away from danger. Listening to the radio had become part of the construction and dissemination of national identity,⁶ and during wartime the practice became central to creating a sense of unity and securing morale.⁷ It is in these contexts that birdsong took its place alongside the chief output during wartime, that of popular music, albeit a much smaller one.⁸ I seek to address several questions. What kinds of interests were at play and what happened to listening as commercial birdsong recordings were created? How was birdsong on the radio received by listeners and what kinds of meanings were attached to these sounds during wartime by the listening public, the BBC and scientific experts?

Listening to recorded birdsong

Until the mid-1930s, the experience of hearing a bird sing could only be had in gardens and parks and perhaps from the kitchen or sitting-room windowsill in the spring and summertime. Recording sound so that it could be reproduced for broadcast was a technique still confined to the studio, even though Thomas Edison's sensational 'talking machine' had been patented in 1878. The BBC rarely recorded its broadcasts. An electro-magnetic device called the Blattnerphone that recorded onto steel wire and tape was installed at Savoy Hill in 1931 but it was difficult and expensive to use.⁹ When in 1936 Desmond Hawkins broadcast his anthology of English poets who had written about English birds, *A Nest of Singing Birds*, he had to call upon Imito, the Australian animal sound impersonator.¹⁰

⁶ Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 277-303; Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain*.

⁷ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 2.

⁸ Christina Baade, *Victory Through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹ Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 99-100. Flat-disc recording was more flexible and became the prime method of recording and editing in the mid-1930s.

¹⁰ 'A Nest of Singing Birds', *Radio Times*, 13 November, 1936, 72.

In fact, there was a recording of a nightingale in *His Master's Voice General Catalogue* from 1911 that had been made by Carl Reich in Berlin. But this was a captive bird 'taken from its nest shortly after hatching, and reared by hand'.¹¹ Reich would have had to train the bird to sing down the horn of a phonograph device.¹² By 1914 the HMV catalogue listed seven 'actual bird records' of a captive blackbird, sprosser (a thrush nightingale), thrush and nightingale.¹³ While recordings were made and published commercially of the nightingale with Harrison's cello in her Surrey garden in May 1927, they were not widely taken up by the public.¹⁴

Ludwig Koch's recordings

The first collection of wild British bird sounds to be recorded was made by a German Jewish émigré, exiled in Britain in 1936. Ludwig Koch arrived 'unknown and penniless' in London in the February mist and drizzle and almost immediately began to plan a new recording project.¹⁵ Mary Adams, one of the BBC's first science programme producers, wrote to Koch asking to hear his collection of German birdsong recordings that he had been working on for years.¹⁶ She was working with the anthropologist Tom Harrisson on a series of programmes about birdwatching, but Koch could not be persuaded.¹⁷ He wrote in his memoir: 'I had to decline the offer since, with the approach of the nesting season, I wanted to start making new recordings which were to be the beginning of a new collection of British birds, and the editing of my continental records would have interfered with this.'¹⁸ Walking in the college gardens of Cambridge University, Koch had his first chance to listen to the spring song period. What he heard suggested to him that his work in Britain would not simply replicate his recordings of German birds: 'I had the impression that both the blackbird and the song-thrush sang more beautifully than I had heard them do in Germany'.¹⁹ Were his exiled ears playing tricks on him?

Koch was a devoted nature sound recordist, who had worked as a director at Electrical and Musical Industries (EMI) in Germany where he was responsible for developing the gramophone for 'cultural' and 'educational' purposes.²⁰ It was here that Koch formulated the idea of a 'sound-book', comprising text, images and gramophone

¹¹ *His Master's Voice General Catalogue* (London: Gramophone Company, 1911), 67.

¹² Reich's recording can be compared to the recording of the Surrey nightingale singing free in 1927 by listening to the CD *Nightingales: A Celebration*.

¹³ *His Master's Voice General Catalogue* (London: Gramophone Company, 1914), 139.

¹⁴ Peter Copeland, Jeffrey Boswall and Leonard Petts, *Birdsongs on Old Records: A Coarsegroove Discography of Palearctic Region Bird Sound 1910-1958* (London: British Library Wildlife Sounds, National Sound Archive, 1988), 5.

¹⁵ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 34.

¹⁶ BBC Written Archive, S26/1/1, June 1935-May 1936 correspondence, letter 17/3/1936.

¹⁷ BBC Written Archive, Rcont1, Talks Tom Harrisson file1A 1932-36.

¹⁸ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

recordings. He published eleven of these sets covering the sounds of animals recorded at Berlin zoo, birds in the woods around Brandenburg, and city soundscapes of Cologne and Leipzig, some recorded acoustically and others using the new Neumann electrical gear.²¹ He published, with ornithologist Oscar Heinroth, his first sound-book dedicated to birdsong in 1935, *Gefiederte Meistersänger (Feathered Mastersingers)*.²² Using new developments in recording techniques, Koch was able to advance the limited conventions of the day that used paper and ink to make sense of birdsong for scientific or aesthetic reasons. He wanted to break away from the ‘musical notations and curves which mean nothing either to a scientist or to a bird-lover’.²³ He felt, too, that the translation of bird sounds into words ‘such as *tu, tu, tu* or *tse tse tse* will never bring to the ears of the average listener the sweetness of the song of the wood-lark or the characteristic note of the marsh-tit’.²⁴ There had been no other ways to communicate the complexities and joys of birdsong, but for Koch too much was lost.

Koch’s mission was to capture the songs of birds in their own habitats. It was worth the effort because he was convinced that caged birds did not sing in the same way as those in the wild.²⁵ Apart from his sound recording expertise, Koch was a musician who had trained as a pianist and then gone on to sing Lieder and opera, to tour in Europe and be recorded.²⁶ Following this passion, he now sought the big moments of springtime bravura performance. But to witness these and commit them to the unwieldy recording equipment available in 1936 was an enormous challenge of determination and technique (Figure 15). He chose the comfortable counties of Surrey and Kent to find his ‘British’ birds, taking with him a seven-tonne Parlophone recording truck and a small team of engineers.²⁷ The truck meant that he could not stray far from the road. Though Koch was often recording very early in the morning, as dawn broke the sound of aircraft, trains, cars and motorcycles interfered with recording, picked up clearly by the microphone ‘with its acute sensitivity’.²⁸ Apart from the problems of the encroachment of modern noise was the challenge of catching

²¹ Ibid., 25-7.

²² Ibid., 27-9.

²³ Ibid., 25.

²⁴ Ibid. In Britain, in 1922, Walter Garstang had published his affectionate *Songs of the Birds* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1922) using these modes of representation, alongside his poems about the songs of some twenty birds. Before that, many poets had tried to capture the rhythms and sound shapes of the nightingale’s voice, John Clare in 1832 rendering in words the sounds of the bird outside his window more accurately than anyone would for almost a century. See Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 24-25. For a detailed expansion about transcription, musical notation and other methods of fixing birdsong see Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 160-70.

²⁵ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 26.

²⁶ Ibid., 17-20.

²⁷ The BBC had not offered Koch the use of its own outside broadcasts recording truck, which tended to be seen as a toy and rarely put into action. In 1936, outside broadcasts made up only 2% of national programmes: Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 54.

²⁸ Nicholson and Koch, *More Songs of Wild Birds*, 36, 38. Nicholson comments on ‘how the natural peace of the country was drowned under the indefatigable hum of distant engines and wheels’.

a rare, fleeting moment when a bird was perched in song and in range of the microphones, before it took flight. Often, in his truck, Koch was listening to a bird having never seen it, yet the acousmatic thrill of a chance encounter could, with patience, be inscribed onto wax. Even then, it is clear from Koch's explanation of the editing process that only tiny passages of recorded birdsong, 'often only a few millimetres', would go to make a record that the public would hear.²⁹



Figure 15. Ludwig Koch in his beret setting up a microphone with a colleague at night (Nicholson and Koch, *More Songs of Wild Birds*, London: Witherby, 1937, 4).

Birdsong fixed for study

Using these painstaking processes, Koch was able to fix on record, track-by-track, individual examples of the familiar fluttering life that so many Britons knew and loved – the blackbird, song-thrush, green woodpecker, nightingale, cuckoo, chaffinch, willow-warbler, whitethroat, great tit, robin, wren, hedge-sparrow, turtle-dove and wood-pigeon. However well-known such birds were to the British public, listening

²⁹ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, xxvii.

experiences were incidental and transitory for most. Rarely was a bird heard in full song, with all its variations, the listener given the opportunity to concentrate on those moments of individual performance. Koch believed that ‘even farmers and woodsmen, who in spring often hear a song-thrush or a blackbird almost every minute, are often unable to name the singer’.³⁰ Birdsong was everywhere, yet still extraordinary and untamed, and in a way unheard.

With Max Nicholson, who provided an expert ornithological text, and an introduction from the high-profile science populariser and secretary of the Zoological Society of Great Britain, Julian Huxley, Koch’s recordings were published in 1936 as a sound-book called *Songs of Wild Birds*. This format, new to Britain, included a handbook with photographs, pull-out charts and two gramophone records, all packaged in a colourful presentation box and selling for 15 shillings (Figure 16). This was a new kind of product and a unique collection of British birdsong. The sound of the countryside had been distilled in birdsong and brought into the suburban home. To own the sound-book allowed the private listening of a public sound to take place in the comfort of one’s armchair. But the modern listener was not necessarily indulging only in a ‘ceremony of the solitary’, because this pleasure was part of a burgeoning collective interest in bird life in Britain.³¹ At the heart of this interest was the building of new public knowledge of birds and their song for pleasure and the advancement of scientific knowledge. Huxley and Nicholson promoted this endeavour, but not only for scientific reasons.³² Huxley believed that birdsong was an ‘expression’ of the nation. ‘The yellow-hammer’s song seems the best possible expression of hot country roads in July’ he wrote.³³ Knowledge of the yellow-hammer’s song gave a sense of citizenship. And knowledge acquired in the field or at home was a way of being modern as well as a way to know one’s country.

Koch, Huxley and Nicholson saw this collection as a way to encourage people get to know the character and complexities of individual bird sounds ‘without distraction’.³⁴ This concentrated modern listening would bring knowledge and enlightenment, not simply enchantment. The recording process allowed minute details to be noticed and

³⁰ Ibid., xxi.

³¹ Lacey discusses how the privatisation of listening does not necessarily create a disconnection from public culture: *Listening Publics*, 121. See also William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³² As early as 1916, Julian Huxley suggested that the ‘vast army of birdlovers and bird-watchers to-day in existence’ could be directed to channel their enthusiasms into solving, with biologists, fundamental problems of science: ‘Bird-Watching and Biological Science (part 1)’, *Auk* 33 (1916). For a discussion of Max Nicholson’s shaping of the birdwatcher in the 1930s, see Macdonald, “What Makes you a Scientist”, 54-60. On citizen scientists see Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 253-9.

³³ Julian Huxley, *Bird-Watching and Bird Behaviour* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), 7.

³⁴ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, xxi.

heard in ways that were not possible before. Listening was no longer bounded by an arbitrary moment; now it could be controlled and repeated. Moreover, the seeming realism of Koch's recordings of birdsong provided data with the 'virtue of disinterested objectivity', a quality prized by scientists.³⁵ Yet Koch had gone to great effort to detach the sound specimens of each bird from their natural environment, striving to isolate individuals as far as he could from the chatter of other birds. In this sense, Koch had produced a false impression of birdsong by removing the messiness of nature's sonic environment and the interactions of other birds. He had particularly avoided recording in countryside 'bird sanctuaries [...] since they would not have served our purpose of helping people distinguish particular songs'.³⁶

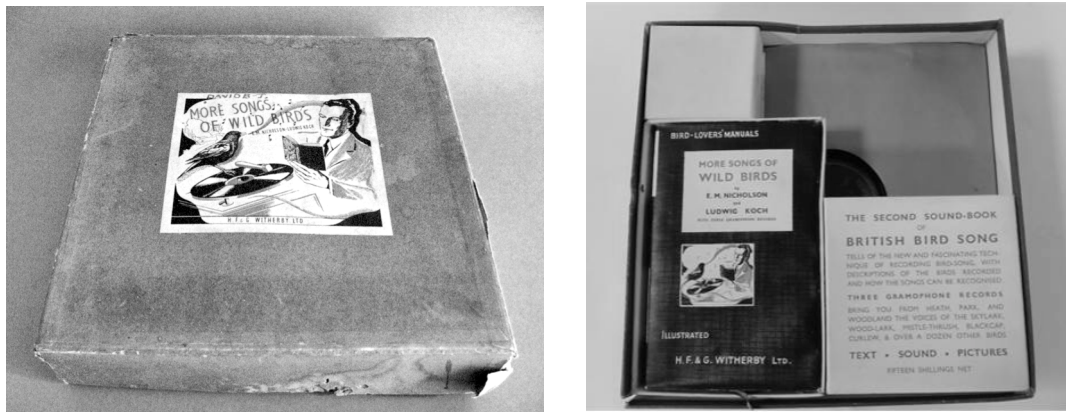


Figure 16. *More Songs of Wild Birds* (1937), the second sound-book, showing the box cover and contents, which were a handbook and two 10-inch gramophone records.

The collection was not intended to provide comforting rural atmospherics or bucolic montages for the urbanite. A second sound-book, *More Songs of Wild Birds* (1937), did offer a 'medley of bird's voices', however these recordings, which included a little owl, rook, jay and 'dawn choir', were there to afford 'a pleasurable exercise for the bird-lover who will have the opportunity of distinguishing one song from another'.³⁷ The intention of these collections of birdsong was to educate the listener; Max Nicholson provided detailed listening notes as a guide to understand characteristics within and between species:

³⁵ On the idea of the objectivity of sound recording see Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 57. See also, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2007).

³⁶ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, xxii.

³⁷ Nicholson and Koch, *More Songs of Wild Birds*, inside front cover.

(2 min 30 sec) The *cuckoo* is now heard calling. During the first fifteen seconds he utters a dozen cries without a break, then he flies away (2 min 45 sec) and is heard faintly for a few seconds in the background. Now at (2 min 55 sec) he is back again, and two other voices – a *chiffchaff's* and a *woodpigeon's* – can be heard faintly in the background. (3 min 00 sec) Now he is calling more deliberately, and in the first ten seconds of the third minute he only utters six notes. At this stage the *chiffchaff* becomes rather more distinct, singing a double note as monotonous in its own way as the cuckoo's, and just before the record ends a faint (3 min 11 sec) *blackbird* song is heard.³⁸

This approach to listening, Nicholson argued, guarded against the risk of sentimentalising the beauties of birdsong with 'false emotions or beliefs which might hinder a true appreciation'.³⁹ Distractions ruined the spell of bird music and full appreciation could be best had by listening in silence, seated comfortably with the lights dimmed.⁴⁰ Careful listening was required for knowledge-making but equally it was the gateway to pleasure-making.

The fidelity of these recordings gave them the status of sonic documents, but this quality also meant that, despite the rational, educative intents, they could transport the listener to imaginative worlds. Huxley with his expert ear felt that to hear these records was 'to obtain a true picture of the birds' voices'.⁴¹ It was this sense of the real, coming from the mediated, that Huxley said could evoke the singers and their natural environment:

As the nightingale's voice escaped from its ebonite prison under the touch of the needle and the scientific magic of the sound-box, I felt myself transported to dusk in an April copse-wood. The clear notes of the cuckoo with their blend of clear spring feeling and irritating monotony, the chaffinch's simple and cheerful strain, were equally evocatory; and with the laugh of the green woodpecker, the yellowing July fields and darkening green of July woods were in the room.⁴²

Interestingly, Huxley could feel simultaneously a realness of the bird's presence in the room, but at the same time he found himself in the woods. In either of these imaginative states, the medium had disappeared, a function of the faithfulness of the recordings as well as subjective complicity to acoustic transparency.⁴³

³⁸ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, 197.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴³ On transparency see Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 256-9; Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 67-71. The mass transit of minds from the domestic realm to somewhere better was a quality associated with radio at this time, through the production of mental imagery stimulated by a sense of proximity to a sound scene. See Susan Douglas, *Listening In*, 26-30.

The sound-books of birdsong sold well before the war, surprising the publisher.⁴⁴ They continued to attract interest, two further impressions of the first being made during WWII, and many more over the next decade. Ornithologists loved these collections,⁴⁵ but the sound-books were well-reviewed by the general press too and would have appealed to all kinds of bird lovers. In 1936, *The Listener*, the high-brow magazine of the BBC, said that Koch's first set of discs offered 'a new vista of delight and knowledge to everyman'. Moreover, the reviewer felt there was something special about the sounds Koch had put on disc that distinguished them from the common currency of popular music: 'They are worth a dozen of the music everyone knows. They are worth twelve hundred cage-birds'.⁴⁶ These recordings were quite exceptional in Britain in the 1930s and formed the basis of Koch's BBC radio broadcasts throughout WWII. But before those broadcasts are considered, it is important to understand the kinds of listening attention that came with the anticipation of war and the new sounds of war itself on the home front. The way that birdsong would be heard, including Koch's recordings, would change in ways that meant these sounds became more than sources of knowledge.

Home front listening tensions

The anticipation of another war brought a vivid fear of aerial bombing. Public discussion of the threat began as early as 1932. In November of that year, Stanley Baldwin, serving in the coalition government, revealed his sense of the nation's vulnerability when he announced that there was no greater fear than 'fear of the air'. His prognosis was chilling: 'I think it is well also for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed'.⁴⁷ After only one raid, Bertrand Russell predicted in 1936, London 'will be one vast raving bedlam, the hospitals will be stormed'.⁴⁸ In the mid-1930s the threat from the air was sensationalised in films, novels and political tracts.⁴⁹ The most prominent cinematic expositions were *High Treason* (1929) written by Noel Pemberton Billing, the Alexander Korda production of the H. G. Wells novel *The Shape of Things to Come* (1936) and *Midnight Menace* (1937), renamed *Bombs Over London* based on

⁴⁴ BBC Written Archive, S26/1/6 Koch, correspondence file 6, Witherby sales statement, December, 1936.

⁴⁵ Book review, *British Birds*, 1 December (1937): 239.

⁴⁶ Book Chronicle, *The Listener*, 4 November, 1936, 877.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Reynolds, *The Shadow of War*, 225. Military planners also held this view and they predicted 20,000 casualties in the initial 24 hours of an air attack, rising to perhaps 150,000 by the end of the first week.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 226. Mansell (*The Age of Noise*, 161, 170) argues that prominent neurologist Sir James Purves-Stewart was among those who warned that the terrifying noises of the Blitz could bring about an epidemic of shell shock, of the kind seen in the trenches, in urban populations.

⁴⁹ Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014); Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

a story by Wyndham Lewis. The film *Things to Come* opens with mass chaos and panic in central London as an air attack begins on Christmas Eve. Anti-aircraft batteries fire into the night sky before bombs fall and destroy much of the city.⁵⁰ The soundtrack is the only education of the public imagination in the sounds of aerial bombardment that might be expected in another war. Before this it was the box office hit of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) as the first major ‘talkie’ about the WWI that allowed audiences to hear dialogue, as well as the noise of battle; the bullets, the shells, the screams of the wounded.⁵¹

There is irony that the late 1930s saw increasing air-minded awareness of danger from the sky and the sounds that might herald an attack, while increasing attention was also paid to birdlife and its particular sounds. But in light of the emerging perceptual changes in public listening, it is reasonable to assume that the songs of birds took on revised and enhanced meanings. Knowledge through understanding the sounds of peace and war coexisted, and may have reinforced each other. The outbreak of war brought with it a preoccupation with the sky (Figure 17). Paul Nash, an official war artist for a second time, wrote these dramatic but telling words: ‘But when the War came, suddenly the sky was upon us all like a huge hawk hovering, threatening. Everyone was searching the sky expecting some terror to fall.’⁵²

Observation of the skies with the eyes and ears became the task of the Observer Corps, who were learning to identify allied and enemy aircraft and collecting information in order to construct maps of aircraft movements for RAF Fighter Command.⁵³ But as Nash indicated, many more citizens were looking upwards. R. A. Saville-Sneath’s *Aircraft Recognition*, issued in February 1941 in the familiar orange Penguin paperback format, sold more than seven million copies.⁵⁴ Saville-Sneath gives a short chapter to acoustic identification, though he said that lack of experience of hearing enemy aircraft meant that recognition through sound alone was difficult.⁵⁵ However, another account of listening by the Observer Corps was confident that by knowing the sound of friendly aircraft, discrepancies could be detected as ‘professional discrimination’ was acquired. The Observer Corps found a newly revitalised sense of sonic mindedness:

⁵⁰ H. G. Wells’ novel *The War in the Air* (1908) set the pattern for much of the fiction and non-fiction about the effects of aerial bombing.

⁵¹ Reynolds, *The Shadow of War*, 203.

⁵² Paul Nash, *Aerial Flowers* (Oxford: Counterpoint, 1947), 5.

⁵³ Macdonald, “What Makes You a Scientist”, 56.

⁵⁴ Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 77.

⁵⁵ R. A. Saville-Sneath, *Aircraft Recognition* (London: Penguin, 1990 [1941]), 32. The 1941 *The Spotter’s Handbook* sold seven million copies (Macdonald, “What Makes You a Scientist”, 66).

For many Observers the countless hours spent in listening have awakened a long dormant sense; the sense that registers, catalogues and above all, appreciates the infinitesimal sounds of which so many people are unaware. There is no such state as “silence”. The Observer will never again be entirely lonely.⁵⁶

This appreciation of sound by investing energy in training the ear calls to mind the words of Koch and Huxley, who recommended the same process to reveal the richness of the acoustic world. In other words, it was not only war that promoted acute engagement with the auditory environment, but this now became increasingly commonplace and focused on safety and danger above all else. The nation was depicted as vigilant and determined in its attention to the sky in mass media and propaganda films. *London Can Take It!*, showed the intended American audience how in spite of the German Blitz on London, morale was higher than ever.⁵⁷ The narrator tells how ‘listening crews are posted all the way from the coast to London to pick up the drone of the German planes’, while the film shows teams positioning their listening apparatus.

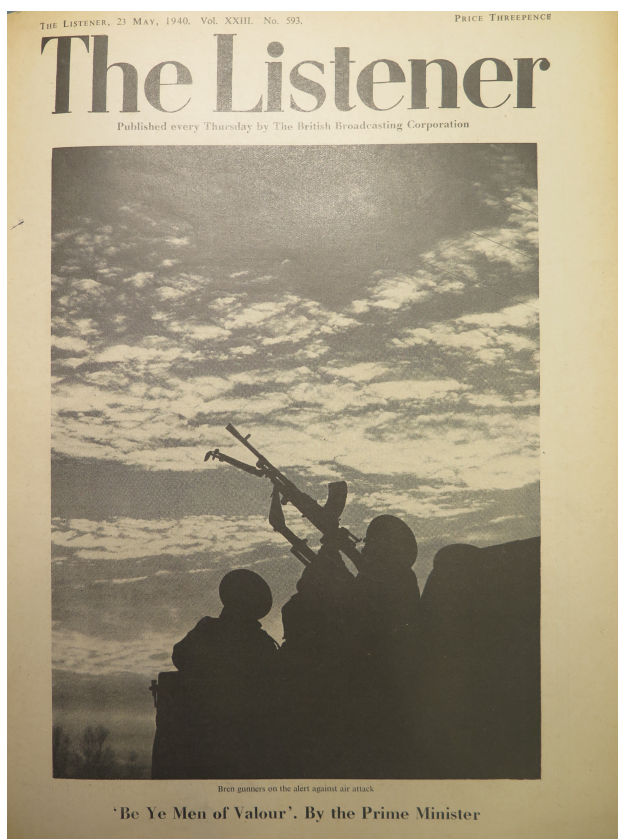


Figure 17. ‘Bren Gunners on the Alert against Air Attack’ (*The Listener*, 23 May, 1940).

⁵⁶ H. Ramsden Whitty, *Observers’ Tale: The Story of Group 17 of the R.O.C.* (London: Roland Brothers, 1951), 26.

⁵⁷ *London Can Take It!*, 1940, dir. Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings.

Listening out for danger was by no means the preserve of home forces, however. Many ordinary civilians were listening in the cities, even during the daytime, as this passage from the journalist H. V. Morton makes clear:

Although the public appears to disregard daylight sirens, every one is listening. Air war sharpens the ears, and a large part of the technique of self-preservation in raided cities is the ability to recognize instantly those sounds which are dangerous. It may be the first salvo of a nearby gun, or the swift whine of a descending bomb, which, although it may pitch half a mile away, always seems to be falling in a direct line to the crown of one's head. At such sounds, the streets empty.⁵⁸

After raids, listening continued. Morton tells of a dog rescued that 'could be heard yelping in the ruins of a home'.⁵⁹ And rescue workers called for quiet to listen for people trapped in fallen buildings before demolition would go ahead.⁶⁰ Listening anxieties would reach their peak at night-time, when German bombing raids were most frequent. In bed, Virginia Woolf found herself 'listening to the zoom of a hornet which may at any moment sting you to death'.⁶¹ Morton described how 'as darkness approaches people become restless and begin to think of getting home before the black-out'.⁶² Black-outs were the single most hated feature of the early home front war, the impact psychological as well as physical in villages as well as towns and cities.⁶³ This sensory deprivation and practical inconvenience affected the spirits. Home alone in the evenings, a typist from Liverpool was depressed and hedged-in by the blackness: 'I don't think I can go on like this all winter without going off my head', she reported in a Mass Observation survey.⁶⁴ 'One sits at home and drinks and smokes too much. One gets the wireless mania, too', reported a middle-aged male MO contributor from Runcorn. These kinds of cultivation of listening, in the sensory duress of wartime, were nevertheless part of the way people would build their knowledge of safety and danger. They are not dissimilar to the kinds of trench sonic mindedness that were considered in Chapter 1.

There was one kind of wartime sensory restriction that aimed to limit human sound-making, even encouraging silence as a condition of security and citizenship. People were asked by the authorities to 'keep mum' to avoid depressing morale by spreading

⁵⁸ H. V. Morton, *H. V. Morton's London* (London: Methuen, 1948 [1942]), viii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁶⁰ Photograph of demolition workers standing still and quiet while rescue workers listen, IWM, 'Air Raid Damage', catalogue number HU 680, accessed 8 August, 2017, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205068708>.

⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid', *New Republic*, 21 October, 1940, 549-51.

⁶² *H. V. Morton's London*, ix.

⁶³ Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, *War Begins at Home* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), 184-6; Bourke, *Fear*, 229.

⁶⁴ Harrisson and Madge, *War Begins at Home*, 201. This Mass Observation report extensively documents the largely negative feelings about the blackout for those at home and making their way about outdoors: see 186-203.

rumours or passing on important intelligence. A raised consciousness of gossip, secrets and spies lasted throughout the war, first through the Ministry of Information's 'Silent Column' campaign, then the 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' poster initiative. In the summer of 1944 the *Daily Mail* urged its readers to resist the temptation to speculate on the exciting progress in France, reminding them that careless talk was 'criminal folly'.⁶⁵ But the historian Jo Fox has argued the public reception to security propaganda that sought to curtail everyday talk was often one of irritation and resentment. This was because the natural urge to chat, a treasured national pastime and itself a part of maintaining morale, had been cast with suspicion.⁶⁶

Radio talk was not curtailed, however – quite the opposite in fact. On the BBC, news airtime almost doubled during the war, while the main programming revolved around music and variety to lift the spirits.⁶⁷ If the sounds of the home front so often signalled danger, the wireless was a listening environment that could counter the stresses of listening by providing public information about the progress of the conflict and the release of entertainment. There were problems in listening to the radio during air raids, however. An audience research report during the Blitz period of October 1940 found that in London and the Midlands sets were often turned down low or switched off completely, for fear that having it on 'may prevent them hearing the sirens or the noise of planes, bombs or guns'.⁶⁸

Yet, officially, the BBC's chief objective during this war was to bind the nation together as a community, and part of this effort was to give talk, comedy, variety, and popular and classical music a classless appeal.⁶⁹ Many talks in the first two years of the conflict, Siân Nicholas notes, focused on promoting Britain's cultural achievements and heritage, not least its 'English rural tradition'.⁷⁰ Music policy reflected an emphasis on broadcasting the well-loved English pastoral vernacular typified by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and while the popularity of 'There'll Always be an England'

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jo Fox, 'Careless Talk: Tensions within British Domestic Propaganda during the Second World War', *The Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012): 964.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 964.

⁶⁷ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 3, *The War of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95. News became the most listened-to programme, the nine o'clock news reaching an audience of as much as half of the population: see 48.

⁶⁸ BBC Written Archive, R9/9/4 Audience Research Special Reports, 'Influence of Air Raids on Listening Habits' (Spontaneous Report), October, 1940.

⁶⁹ Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 221; Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 51-3; David Cardiff and Paddy Scannell, "'Good Luck War Workers!'" Class, Politics and Entertainment in Wartime Broadcasting', in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 98.

⁷⁰ Siân Nicholas, 'The People's Radio: The BBC and Its Audience, 1939-1945', in Hayes and Hill, *Millions Like Us?*, 77; Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 233.

palled in time, ‘The White Cliffs of Dover’ was a consistent favourite.⁷¹ As an ‘instrument of war’ the BBC Home Service became responsible for reflecting, shaping and maintaining British national identity in order to sustain unity and morale.⁷² All output would have to fulfil these objectives to some degree. It is within this broadcasting context, and with heightened public listening states in mind, that Ludwig Koch’s programmes will now be considered.

‘Consoling voices of the air’: Ludwig Koch’s broadcasts⁷³

Koch did not begin broadcasting on the BBC until late 1941. In the spring and summer of that year he was interned on the Isle of Man as an ‘enemy alien’, along with thousands of German and Austrian Jewish refugees. Yet he still managed to make a ‘special study of the hooded crow and herring-gull’ while there.⁷⁴ When released in August, Koch ‘arrived back in London one midnight when a heavy air-raid was in progress’.⁷⁵ When Koch’s radio broadcasts began, the nation had already experienced the intensity of the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, and the differing sensory textures of these two phases of aircraft dog-fights and city bombing, respectively.⁷⁶ Nobody knew what was coming next, so tensions did not necessarily dissipate, and after a period of relative calm, the summer of 1944 saw the jet-propelled V1 flying bombs deployed against London, the so called ‘doodlebug’.⁷⁷ While Koch broadcast, well over 5,000 flying bombs were launched, more than 100 a day, and though many were shot down as expertise developed, 4,735 people were killed and 14,000 injured in and around London; 800,000 houses were damaged.⁷⁸

I want to examine now how Koch’s radio broadcasts of British birds in song might have served to reclaim the air that sirens and German bombs had set in chaotic vibration. It is not sufficient to consider only the sonic, however. Richard Overy has made the broader trauma clear when saying that the ‘violent death of over 43,000 people’ during the Blitz alone ‘was an unprecedented violation of British domestic

⁷¹ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 230. Vaughan Williams’ music could be seen to be too English to represent the nation as a whole: see 230-2.

⁷² Ibid., 2. Many broadcasting scholars have argued that the BBC was a centre point for the construction and dissemination of British national identity during the 1930s and 40s. See Briggs, *The War of Words*, 95; Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 10; Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain*, 234.

⁷³ Punch quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 13.

⁷⁴ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 69.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (London: Penguin, 2014), 73-4.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 192. For a description of the doodlebug attacks and their sound see the 1945 account by the Air Ministry’s writer-in-residence, H. E. Bates, *Flying Bombs Over England* (Oxford: ISIS, 1997, large print edition), 38-50. He describes the harshness of the sound followed by the terrible silence of its descent (2, 38).

⁷⁸ Bates, *Flying Bombs Over England*, 45.

life'.⁷⁹ Although historians have emphasised that the official predictions of mass air-raid neurosis failed to materialise, the home front population lived in a condition of stress, and morale could break down, as we have seen.⁸⁰

Koch was given regular slots on the radio from 1941 and continued broadcasting throughout the war on *Children's Hour*, *Country Magazine* and with a series of five-to fifteen-minute solo shows. According to the *Radio Times*, Koch and his recordings appeared on air on thirty-two occasions during the war, most of which featured birdsong. *Country Magazine* was conceived as a wartime programme, which by 1946 had an audience of almost seven million listeners.⁸¹ The programme closed with one of Koch's 'sound-pictures' of the countryside.⁸² *Children's Hour* had been running since radio began and went out during wartime just before tea-time. By appearing on *Children's Hour* Koch had the ears of millions, when many under 16s had been evacuated from cities and vulnerable coastal towns in the south and east of England. Popular with adults as well as children, the programme acted as a daily point of contact between displaced family and friends.⁸³

For his young listeners, Koch managed to convey the way he worked in the field – the early rising, the pursuit of a bird and the exquisite pay-off of witnessing a good singer. This excerpt from a 1943 script gives a sense of how Koch would take his audience with him using vivid and involving descriptions to bring the outdoors to life, while communicating details of the life of the skylark:

Let us creep closer, but carefully, not to do any harm to the birds' grass nests in a hollow in the ground. It is still pitch dark, before dawn; to hear the first lark you must get up with the lark. No noise, but many miles away in a hamlet I can hear faint barking and lowing. We are close to the skylark, it starts rising again. Here it is:-

(Sky Lark)

That was a very good performance and an extraordinarily good singer.⁸⁴

Beyond these everyday moments, the status of Koch's birdsong broadcasts was indicated by their inclusion in Christmas Eve programming in 1941, when *Children's*

⁷⁹ Overy, *The Bombing War*, 126-7.

⁸⁰ The durability of civilian morale has been shown by Edgar Jones, Robin Woolven, Simon Wessely and Bill Durodie, 'Civilian Morale during the Second World War: Responses to Air Raids Re-Examined', *Social History of Medicine* 17 (2004), 464-5.

⁸¹ BBC Written Archive, N2/25 North Region, *Country Magazine* file, memorandum from John Polworth, 8 March, 1946.

⁸² Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 71.

⁸³ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 45.

⁸⁴ BBC Written Archive, Ludwig Koch scripts, 'Listen to Our Songsters', 13 June, 1943.

Hour comprised a piece from Koch called 'Listen to Our Song-Birds in Winter', followed by a 'Visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem' and, finally, prayers.⁸⁵

Koch went on to host five-, ten- and then fifteen-minute solo shows from 1943 to 1945. The 1943 series included *The Nuthatch Sings in February*, *The Mistle Thrush Sings in February* (with the bird singing with the backdrop of a thunderstorm), *Spring is in the Air* (with a nightingale by day, a cuckoo by night, the dawn chorus and garden warbler) and *The Song Thrush is Silent in August*. These programmes punctuated more conventional BBC programming that included talks, plays, light music and the BBC orchestra. He combined a typically playful narrative with the educational in *The Nuthatch Sings in February*, broadcast on Sunday 7 February from 6:55-7pm: 'My particular nuthatch was living in a woodpecker's hole in a large chestnut tree. The entrance to the hole was too large for him so he narrowed it by filling it up with mud.' He then goes on to introduce the listener to six different calls and songs, starting with the warning note ('it sounds, misleadingly, rather peaceful'), the angry call as Koch approached the tree, the mating note ('rather like boys whistling to each other'), and the trill which is sung 'on different levels, from a soft piano to a wide, carrying forte', and so on.⁸⁶ There was depth and detail in Koch's broadcasts as well as good-humoured entertainment.

If Koch's work was thought to be best suited to children's education and entertainment in 1941, as the war progressed Koch had the chance to address broader audiences, concentrating more on the solace and joy that listening to birdsong could bring, rather than the educative aspects. The evolution of Koch's output shows how the morale-boosting qualities of birdsong appear to have been increasingly recognised and given precedence over the earlier focus on careful listening and the development of knowledge that his sound-books emphasised. These broadcasts move birdsong beyond a natural history audience to a much larger public in need of solace and reassurance. When the tradition of the May-time live broadcasts of the Surrey nightingales was stopped in 1942, because the rumble of British bombers on their way to Germany was picked up by the microphones, Koch's recordings were all that remained of birdsong on the radio.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Children's Hour* programme listing, *Radio Times*, 19 December, 1941, 14.

⁸⁶ BBC Written Archive, Ludwig Koch scripts, 'The Nuthatch Sings in February', 7 February, 1943.

⁸⁷ Sam Bonner, audio recording, 1924, British Library catalogue number C653/3. Koch's reputation after the war was ascending in such a way that in 1946 Desmond Hawkins, who went on to found the BBC Natural History Unit, created *The Naturalist* programme, partly as a vehicle for Koch's recordings and thoughts about the natural world: Burton, 'The BBC Natural History Unit', 21.

Opinions about Koch's work are few and far between in the BBC archives, which suggests that the unique natural sound-worlds that Koch had captured were slow to be recognised within the organisation. However, Tom Harrisson, radio critic for the *Observer* during WWII, spotlighted Koch's work as special, linking it to John Grierson's documentary film work of the early 1930s.⁸⁸ He complained that the BBC was using an impoverished repertoire of recorded sounds to enliven programmes: 'There is, for instance, a snatch of B.B.C. Seagull, which I have heard represent "the sea" over and over again – once four times in a day.' He urged senior executives at the BBC to pay attention to Koch's 'aural documentary' collection in this way:

listen to his sweet, babbling brook; his dying bumble bee; the terrifying "Symphony of Steel," and clever Victory V; the strange chaos of his regiment drilling, and beautiful dawn chorus of birds. Listening to these unused records one hears a whole new area of radio reality.⁸⁹

Radio reality for Harrisson referred to a broadcasting that fired the imagination by bringing authentic national sounds and voices to the listener in sonic tableaux, not just as discrete sound effects.⁹⁰ Koch's work, then, could represent the nation through its honest depictions of many everyday identities.

In the following sections of this chapter, having looked at Koch's radio output and some of the wartime listening tensions that coloured its reception by radio listeners, I want to demonstrate the ways in which these broadcasts were interpreted. First, I argue that Koch's birdsong broadcasts provided consolation via the sound of ordinary birds that everyone could appreciate. Koch's recordings of birds were no longer limited to private consumption; these sounds of national heritage had become public property again through their broadcast. Second, I develop an argument about how Koch's birdsong was seen to speak of a soft and gentle patriotism and a natural fortitude, rather than a militaristic one, rooted in notions of citizenship built on knowing the land and its creatures.

Solace of all nature through birdsong

Two weeks before the evacuation of allied forces from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, a letter from Koch appeared in *The Times*. Koch encouraged readers to find comfort in the beauty and persistence of birdsong:

⁸⁸ Tom Harrisson, 'Radio' column, *Observer*, 3 January, 1943, 2. Asa Briggs has said that Harrisson's *Observer* column offered 'a valuable weekly critique' of radio programmes, drawing upon his team of Mass Observation correspondents for opinion and his skills as a writer-producer himself: *The War of Words*, 59-60.

⁸⁹ Harrisson, 'Radio' column.

⁹⁰ Marie Slocombe, with Tim Eckersley, established a sound library at this time when few were interested. However, from the BBC's Written Archives, it is evident that there were tensions with Koch about his endless requests during the war, when resources were limited, to further develop the sound library.

War or no war, bird life is going on and even the armed power of the three dictators cannot prevent it. I would like to advise everybody in a position to do so, to relax his nerves, in listening to the songs, now so beautiful, of the British birds.⁹¹

Before he began broadcasting to the nation, Koch was already convinced that the sound of birds would help people cope with the crisis. During the 1930s the BBC had placed a distinct emphasis on the consoling power of radio, seeing it as an instrument of solace, not simply a broker of ideas, culture and entertainment.⁹² The combination of this vision of broadcasting's gentleness and Koch's sounds of British nature reinforce one another during the war. In fact, Koch believed that broadcasting the timeless sounds of the farmyard would be a direct challenge to the sound of German bombs:

I was allowed [by the BBC] to make all kinds of recordings. I visited a number of factories to explore unusual noises, but amid the din of machinery I longed for the sounds of nature, and persuaded my superiors that this was the right moment to show the enemy, by recording all kinds of farm animals, that even bombing could not entirely shatter the natural peace of this island.⁹³

The natural peace that Koch spoke of was to be found in the countryside, where so many evacuees had been sent, a place that before the war had been enjoyed by new publics indulging in rambling, hiking and youth hostelling at weekends. Now mobility was severely restricted with petrol rationing and rail disruptions, reflected in the government policy idea of 'Holidays at Home'.⁹⁴ A letter in the *Radio Times* from Dora Read in west London in 1943 suggested how Koch's broadcasts could connect listeners with the peace of the countryside that was now missed: 'Many thanks for letting us hear the wonderful birdsong, full of hope and peace to come. Millions of us, used to rambling before the war, are now in factories doing war work. Let us hear more of Ludwig Koch's birds!'⁹⁵ The documentary sound recordings that Koch had experimented with were not only thought to have the potential to 'evoke more vivid mental associations than can be achieved by the spoken word'; such recordings were seen to be able to tell the truth by portraying the real, Tom Harrisson had said. When Koch collaborated with *The Picture Post* in 1945, the intention was to allow the sea to speak to 'a million fireside listeners' by recording the Atlantic rollers of Fistral Bay on the Cornish coast in a sound close-up, with a series of dramatic photographs. The article suggested that in the midst of war, the

⁹¹ Ludwig Koch, 'A Blackbird Mimic', *Times*, 13 May, 1940, 4.

⁹² Briggs, *The Golden Age*, 13. Briggs illustrates this point with a poem about the BBC published in *Punch* on 11 May 1932 which begins: '...consoling voices of the air / Soothing the sightless, cheering the bedridden'.

⁹³ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 71.

⁹⁴ Calder, *The People's War*, 318, 366.

⁹⁵ 'Tweet-Tweet', letter, *Radio Times*, 19 February, 1943, 210.

BBC's documentary recordings could honestly engage the emotions, bringing 'to the fireside and to the lonely soldier on the front, the nostalgic sounds of bacon frying in the pan, the hubbub of the railway station and the confused cacophony of London'.⁹⁶

The sound of the waves does not seem to have been broadcast, but if it had been, would it have been a reminder of the island freedom being fought for? The soothing sounds of home, whether of bacon, birds or breakers, were all deemed to provide an imaginative relief from the pressures of wartime. Their familiar sonic character was in stark contrast to the unpredictability of the noise of air attacks. The fear of attacks was, a Mass Observation report indicated, linked above all with noise: 'It is the siren or the whistle or the explosion or the drone – these are the things that terrify. Fear seems to come to us most of all through our sense of hearing'.⁹⁷

'Classless' songs

Reflecting in his 1955 memoir on his public audience, Koch believed that his birdsong programmes had piqued interest across all lines of age, class and gender: 'among my listeners there are obviously a great number of adepts, men and women of all ages, and of all classes of society'.⁹⁸ This statement is likely to reflect Koch's sense of self-importance, but Julian Huxley, too, saw birdsong as an egalitarian joy that anyone could appreciate. 'I suppose that birds give more pleasure and interest to humanity [...] than all the other groups of the animal kingdom taken together', Huxley wrote in his introduction to Koch's first sound-book. Huxley continued, saying that birds through 'their beauty, vivacity, by their songs and freedom of flight, by their migrations and their domestic arrangements, they make an obvious appeal to the layman, however uninstructed'.⁹⁹ Huxley, as noted earlier, argued for the benefits of attentive listening for the acquisition of knowledge, but he also acknowledged that this was not a precondition for enjoyment.

Huxley went further, arguing that the sense of hearing accessed and seduced the emotions in ways that intellectual engagement could not: 'The associations called up by sound seem to share with those aroused by smell the properties of fullness, immediacy, and emotional completeness to an extent not aroused by those dependent on sight or intellectual comprehension'.¹⁰⁰ If sensory perception rather than intellectual reflection was what was needed to get the most out of listening to

⁹⁶ 'Listen to the Wild Waves', *Picture Post*, 9 June, 1945, 24.

⁹⁷ Mass Observation report, 'Cars and Sirens', 1940, quoted in Adey, 'The Private Life of an Air Raid', 291.

⁹⁸ *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 179.

⁹⁹ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, xiii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

birdsong, this meant its pleasures were open to all Britons. Such a notion would have fitted with the tendency during the war for the BBC to move away from the cultural elitism of its programming, towards an uneasy kind of ‘elevated classlessness’.¹⁰¹

It is certainly true that what listeners heard in Koch’s selection of birds were ordinary voices, some of which would be familiar even if they could not be identified precisely. One can argue that the songs of the robin, blackbird, cuckoo and nightingale were part of a sonic national character rooted in the everyday ordinariness that became an increasing part of the tone of broadcasting during the war. J. B. Priestley’s enormously popular *Postscripts*, broadcast at the height of the invasion fear, brought his mellow Yorkshire accent and down-to-earth manner to millions. Other propaganda was most successful when it adopted a tone that chimed with typical British citizens.¹⁰² In addition, from 1940 there was an effort to get regional dialects and class accents of British workers into talks, discussions, features and light entertainment, while announcers with northern and Scottish accents were given the microphone.¹⁰³ Koch’s voice was anything but ordinary. We don’t know how it was interpreted by radio listeners, though we can assume it came across as interestingly foreign rather than obviously German.¹⁰⁴ His eccentric, high-pitched delivery was unmistakable, and with his heavy German accent he would almost sing the English language.¹⁰⁵ Ordinary avian voices were framed by an extraordinary human voice.

In February 1940, John Reith, no longer at the BBC, but knighted and Minister of Information, advanced the idea that there was a need for new national songs that everyone could share and get behind. He suggested approaching the nation’s leading composers to write a series of what he thought could be ‘lay hymns’ of ‘the Jerusalem brand’. Reith wanted patriotic themes ‘but not necessarily warlike’ ones.¹⁰⁶ The suggestion does not seem to have been successful, but, in light of this, one might see the birds singing from the wireless as the composers of small pastoral lay hymns that everyone could enjoy. These birds could even be said to have been

¹⁰¹ Nicholas, *The People’s Radio*, 63. In wartime, radio came to align itself with ‘the people’ and therefore the war efforts as a whole, diminishing interwar social antagonisms of highbrow and lowbrow musical tastes. Variety and popular music increased and comedy and talks acquired a classless quality in their appeal, with working-class tastes especially catered for: Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 221.

¹⁰² Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 100.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 239–40. On ideas of ordinariness see Jo Fox, ‘Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the “Ordinary” in British Films of the Second World War’, *The Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006).

¹⁰⁴ Attitudes to German people in relation to the Nazi campaign hardened during the war. By 1943, many believed that there was no difference between Germans and Nazis: Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 160.

¹⁰⁵ For more on Koch’s style as a broadcaster see Simon Elmes, *Hello Again: Nine Decades of Radio Voices* (London: Arrow Books, 2012), 192–4.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 229.

providing their own wordless national anthems in miniature, ones that reminded radio listeners of Blake's green and pleasant land. Vera Lynn's romantic wartime tune, 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square', made use of the idea of an ancient natural motif within a new national song. Patriotism was undoubtedly read into British birdsong in this period.

Patriotic songs

Koch's broadcasts can be seen as part of explicit patriotic celebrations of rural heritage. *Country Magazine*, a programme about the vitality of the countryside and its farming communities that Koch featured on, was launched in 1942. It was accompanied by others, including *The Countryman in Wartime* and *Your Garden in Wartime*. Another programme, *The Land We Defend*, pictured Britain as one vast and pretty village populated by lovers of nature and countryside.¹⁰⁷ The English countryside, which stood for peace, tranquillity, stability, harmony and timelessness, was emblematic of what Sonya Rose has referred to as the 'authentic nation' during WWII.¹⁰⁸

However, Koch's programmes did more than refer to ideals of a romanticised pastoral southern 'England' of the past, where he had recorded his birds, but few lived.¹⁰⁹ Birds and their song had a common place in most British lives, including suburban and urban experiences. Birdlife was part and parcel of the crisis, and birdsong was a sensory pleasure that might be encountered from the window, street, garden, park, allotment or bombsite. Birds were not a symbol of rolling green landscape and country lanes, the one that recruitment posters had employed in both wars, so much as a vibrant and present reality in people's lives.¹¹⁰ Birdsong was not simply a cue for nostalgic longing for a lost past; rather it pointed to the newly built suburbias with their access to green pleasures that enabled 'the salesman or the clerk, out of hours, to be almost a country gentleman'.¹¹¹ There is more than a little of the 'deep England' myth here in Priestley's words, but the point is that to hear birdsong was more to do with everyday reality than everyday fantasy. Birdsong was more than a symbol of British nature; for many it *was* British nature, a cherished part of national identity. This link between birdsong and national identity was put to use in the propaganda

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 233.

¹⁰⁸ *Which People's War?*, 213-4, 289.

¹⁰⁹ The idea of the rural was usually associated with England, rather than Britain, but the relationship is complex. See Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', 85-111.

¹¹⁰ Frank Newbould's September 1942 recruitment poster campaign *Your Britain, Fight for It Now* depicted pastures and leafy villages of an evocative but bygone era for most people. During WWI the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee had used idyllic rural imagery of southern English landscape in its 1915 campaign.

¹¹¹ J. B. Priestley quoted in Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, 185.

film *Listen to Britain*, which defined national character through the chatter of birds, the rustle of summer corn and peaceful rural scenes, together with the powerful modern sounds of British aircraft, factories and coal mining.¹¹²

Koch was by no means the only enthusiast for birds and their song who was active and vocal during WWII. Books about birds were published quite intentionally in the midst of war. One small Pelican paperback placed great emphasis on the belief that paying attention to birds could improve the lives of ordinary people at war.¹¹³ Ornithologist James Fisher's book was called simply *Watching Birds*. Writing just after the Battle of Britain, in November 1940, Fisher placed birds at the centre of the conflict:

Some people might consider an apology necessary for the appearance of a book about birds at a time when Britain is fighting for its own and many other lives. I make no such apology. Birds are part of the heritage we are fighting for. After this war ordinary people are going to have a better time than they have had; they are going to get about more[...] many will get the opportunity hitherto sought in vain, of watching wild creatures and making discoveries about them. It is for these men and women, and not the privileged few to whom ornithology has been an indulgence, that I have written this little book.¹¹⁴

Birds were part of the nation's heritage and identity, threatened by invasion from the sky or the coast, and a precious natural resource for the future, Fisher argued. While Fisher's book is a serious work covering anatomy, migration, habitats, territory and courtship, with technical illustrations and charts, it went on to sell over three million copies and is credited for enthusing a whole generation of the public into an appreciation of birds.¹¹⁵ Perhaps simply to possess such a book, without getting too involved in the detail, allowed the owner to possess something of the nation's bird heritage and its consolations.

Patriotism, but also scientific interests, were at play when British birds were declared the best singers. Koch had demonstrated on air in 1944 during *The Song Thrush is Silent in August* 'the great superiority of the British over the German song-thrush whom I also know well'. He played first his German recording, then his British one, asking the listener to make up their own mind.¹¹⁶ His refugee status in the safety of Britain may well have influenced how he heard British birds, but he was not the only

¹¹² For sonic analyses of *Listen to Britain* see Mansell, *The Age of Noise*, 178-180; E. Anna Claydon, 'National Identity, the GPO Film Unit and their Music', in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 183. Claydon argues that because Britain was still an 'aural media nation' in the 1930s and 40s the use of sound to provoke national pride in *Listen to Britain* was more important than visualising it.

¹¹³ James Fisher, *Watching Birds* (London: Penguin, 1946 [1941]), 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Moss, *A Bird in the Bush*, 168.

¹¹⁶ BBC Written Archive, Ludwig Koch scripts, 'The Song Thrush is Silent in August', 18 September, 1944.

one who held such views. Seasoned ornithologists like Max Nicholson had made similar claims in the 1930s, asserting that in no other country was birdsong as powerful, varied and pleasing as in England. The fact that so many resident species were ‘good songsters’, common to gardens and familiar to ordinary people, made ‘England a paradise for bird-song’.¹¹⁷

One further kind of patriotic spirit, reflected in the short-lived ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster campaign, was observed in the behaviour of birds. The Ministry of Information’s slogan drew its inspiration from public and private discourse during WWI.¹¹⁸ The aim of the injunction was to encourage wartime resilience, particularly qualities of fortitude on the home front. So it was in birds, too, that a kind of Blitz-spirit was recognised, embodied in their vocal performances amid the noise and chaos of conflict. Such apparent endurance seemed to provide inspiration and hope that birdlife, and therefore human life, would prevail. It was part of the myth-making that was prevalent and needed during the war. Ludwig Koch boasted that ‘a Spitfire’s drone would not scare a nightingale’,¹¹⁹ although the naturalist Richard Fitter reported that ‘one result of the “fly blitz” of 1944 was to drive many of the woodpigeons from the London parks’.¹²⁰ Not all birds seemed to display Blitz-spirit, but Fitter’s 1945 book *London’s Natural History* is nevertheless a tribute to London’s wildlife as robust and regenerative, rising out of the bombsites.

Birdsong civilised and civilising

The charged atmosphere of 1939 did not prevent me from exploring the marshes of Suffolk. I was invited to visit Sir Ronald Davison at his country house near Dunwich, and here I heard my first bittern in this country, and saw and heard bearded tits, too. But all these sounds were drowned by the shouting of Hitler.¹²¹

Beneath the patriotic stories that Britons told each other, about the superiority and durability of their country and its creatures, there were more long-standing thoughts in evidence: that humanity needed the close association of birdlife to be fully civilised, to flourish and to progress.¹²² In birdsong, Koch, Huxley, Nicholson and

¹¹⁷ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, 26.

¹¹⁸ Mugglestone, ‘Rethinking the Birth of an Expression’. Some evidence suggests that the posters were never displayed at all.

¹¹⁹ ‘Starman’s Diary’, *The Star*, 8 April, 1943, no pagination.

¹²⁰ R. S. R. Fitter, *London’s Natural History* (London: Collins, 1945), 229–30. Starlings continued to roost in London and the notable heronry in Walthamstow was little affected by close bombing, Fitter also reported.

¹²¹ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 68.

¹²² There is an expansive literature about animal-human relations and the place of animals in human history. Some works that have informed this section are: John Berger, *Why Look at Animals* (London: Penguin, 2009), 12–37; Gray, *The Silence of Animals*, 148–62; Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Mark Cocker, *Birds and People* (London: Jonathan Cape,

others heard the civilised markers of long-proven social harmony and order, moral conduct and artistic musical culture. Avian society appeared to possess all these things, although different parts of elite discourse emphasised particular qualities. The ideas were only part-formed and they were unorthodox in that concepts of Western urban civilisation have usually involved separation from and dominion over the natural environment by cultural elites.¹²³ However, I think it is possible to argue that birdsong suggested to the key characters we have considered some of the ideals of refined human social development, when the state of civilisation was under question. I will go on to show how birds could be looked upon as civilised themselves, but also capable of civilising the human barbarism of the Nazi enemy during WWII.

In 1930, Julian Huxley had published *Bird-Watching and Bird Behaviour*, based on a six-part broadcast series earlier in the year. In the final chapter, he explains the unique evolutionary trajectory of birds that has made them so different to other living things, but then sums up with a plea that birdlife deserves a privileged place next to the human:

For – and this is my last word – in considering the birds’ place in Nature we must remember that they have a place in civilization as well as in wild nature, and that even if we be mechanizing so many aspects of life, or rather, just because we *are* mechanising them, there is all the more reason to reserve to birds – shy birds as well as tame, rare birds as well as common – a place in our civilized scheme of things, and that to see that that place is kept for them, and so for our delectation and that of our posterity.¹²⁴

In this extended thought Huxley, alongside his scientific sense, wonders how Britons will manage modern life without the charm of birds around them. He had noticed how town and city life was enhanced by the presence of birds in America and Germany, where he had seen bird-boxes, bird tables and bird baths successfully encouraging bird populations to be part of the social life of urban-dwellers.¹²⁵ And yet Huxley’s reference to posterity indicated a role for birdlife in human lives beyond everyday pleasures, in the sustenance of new generations facing the continued pressures of industrial modernity. He felt that humans could best survive and evolve in the company of birds, as if both parties would benefit by some kind of ecological and evolutionary synergy. Huxley had held a professorship in zoology at King’s

2013); Brian Fagan, *The Intimate Bond: How Animals Shaped Human History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (London: Merlin Press, 1964).

¹²³ See for example Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: Touchstone, 2001).

¹²⁴ Huxley, *Bird-Watching*, 116.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-4.

College, London, but given it up in order to collaborate with H. G. Wells and son to write what became the most widely distributed account of the new Darwinism, *The Science of Life* (1929).¹²⁶ While Huxley was the foremost public communicator of evolutionary ideas at this time, this did not prevent him from taking these ideas into more speculative terrain.

In more prosaic terms, Huxley found birds to be excellent companions to the rambler or hiker: 'To go out on a country walk and see and hear different wild birds is thus to the bird-watcher rather like running across a number of familiar neighbours, local characters, or old acquaintances'.¹²⁷ Some knowledge of birdsong, he says, 'makes each kind of bird a single and perennial friend'. In other words, by listening, the chorus of birdsong is differentiated into individuals with their own identities. One no longer travelled alone.¹²⁸ In this sense, birds were a part of the fabric of civil society that could be relied upon to enhance a wider sense of community with their rich and diverse personalities.

As a second war became more likely, Max Nicholson also looked to the singing of birds as a reassurance that civilised life would continue. In 1936 he wrote this in the book that accompanied Koch's recordings of British birds:

In a world of growing complexity and difficulty we turn to bird-song as something which is not only delightful in itself, but which has hardly the remotest connection with human worries. We may be uncertain whether London and Paris and Berlin will be reduced to heaps of ruins by the misuse of scientific weapons in the interests of mutual destruction, but we can be sure that in any case nightingales will sing in Surrey every May, and golden orioles will still flute with civilised perfection in German and French spinneys, regardless of human barbarism or of human achievements.¹²⁹

This is a humanist statement not a nationalistic one – birds of *all* nations, Nicholson says here, could be relied upon to carry forward civilisation, however unreliable and quarrelsome human affairs proved to be. He also intimates that the rarefied sensibilities of birds were in the end superior to those of men; birds flew above human chaos, they sang out with 'perfection' in spite of war, their straightforward moral and aesthetic senses pure, their communication honest and heartfelt. Huxley saw birds as partners and participants in the scheme of modern civilisation, that would be impoverished and isolated without them. Nicholson felt that birds were in

¹²⁶ Bowler, *Science for All*, 46-8.

¹²⁷ *Bird-Watching*, 5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁹ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, 183.

some sense more moral beings than humans, and were quite capable of carrying forward their own kind of cultured and ordered civilisation alone.

As a musician and singer, Ludwig Koch had his own opinions about the cultural capacities of birds. For him, they were the most ‘artful of all living things’.¹³⁰ He saw himself as a collector of the best musical performances of birds, but he also intended to document many characteristic elements of Britain’s sonic heritage – natural history, folk-songs, dialects, the voices of famous men and women, the characteristic sounds of different industries and cities. Ultimately he envisioned all these recordings being housed in a ‘Sound Institute’ with local listening branches around the country.¹³¹ Though this idea was not realised, Julian Huxley, as the first director general of UNESCO, resolved in 1948 to have Koch’s collection of more than 500 wildlife recordings preserved.¹³² This material was both a national treasure and a contribution to UNESCO’s objective of promoting international understanding, cooperation and peace, because it demonstrated a part of the distinctive quality of British culture.¹³³ If birdsong was a constituent of British culture then it must also have been part of its story of civilisation.

Civilisation in crisis?

The kind of thinking we have examined here can be better understood if we cast an eye back to WWI and its aftermath. Historians see that conflict as a key moment in the contemporary reconsideration of human progress. British servicemen and women, after the victory in 1918, were given a medal that stated they had fought in ‘The Great War for Civilisation’. Yet the reality of war seemed like the utter negation of civilised values – humans reduced to the level of animals in the mud, blown to pieces by modern machinery. Civilisation in all its sophistication had undone itself.¹³⁴ In the shadow of war, the future of Western civilisation was debated intensely by intellectuals in Europe and America throughout the 1920s.¹³⁵ At home this was much more than a debate about how Britain and the allied powers had defeated German brutality. Britain had its own fears of decline or collapse, and even if they were often elaborated in ways that defied historical reality, talk of ‘civilisation

¹³⁰ Koch, *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 11.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹³² *Ibid.* Sir William Haley, director general of the BBC, responded to the recognition UNESCO had given Koch’s work by providing the resources for him to process his recordings over the next 3 years. On Huxley’s work with UNESCO see Marianne Sommer, ‘Animal Sounds against the Noise of Modernity and War: Julian Huxley (1887–1975) and the Preservation of the Sonic World Heritage’, *Journal of Sonic Studies*, accessed 9 September, 2017, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/325229/325230>.

¹³³ See ‘General Conference First Session Held at UNESCO House, Paris, from 20 November to 10 December 1946’, (UNESCO, 1947), 222, accessed 10 August, 2017, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001145/114580e.pdf>.

¹³⁴ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, 162–3.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 198–207; Overy, *The Morbid Age*.

in crisis' became something of a populist cliché in the interwar years. Richard Overy has pointed out that the morbid moods stemmed not just from rhetoric but were rooted in serious scientific, medical, economic and cultural descriptions of the present.¹³⁶ Other discourses existed, certainly, but 'pessimism was highly contagious', Overy has argued.¹³⁷ The Egyptologist Flinders Petrie, with his *Revolutions of Civilisation* (1911) and Arnold Toynbee's broadcasts in 1931 followed by his *Study of History*, the first part of which appeared in 1934, familiarised many with the idea that civilisations rise and fall, rather than constituting a narrative of sequential progress. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, once it was translated and issued in the early 1920s in Britain, never sold particularly well, but the title became popular shorthand for cultural pessimism.¹³⁸

The remedies to the possibility of crisis in the 1920s and 1930s were many, and Max Nicholson had a role here with his work in economic planning, a project seen to be a primary solution to interwar forecasts of peril.¹³⁹ Together with his ornithological writing and his work to establish the British Trust for Ornithology, he was in 1930 the assistant editor and leader-writer for the new political weekly *Week-End Review*. He authored a special report in the *Review* called 'A National Plan for Great Britain', which was the stimulus for the formation of the liberal grouping called Political and Economic Planning (PEP).¹⁴⁰ Led by Sir Basil Blackett, a director of the Bank of England, Labour politician Kenneth Lindsay, and Israel Sieff, vice-chairman of Marks & Spencer, with Julian Huxley responsible for directing research, PEP sought to use planning methods to rescue the existing order from a sense of impending social and economic disaster.¹⁴¹

Nicholson's report attacked the 'present chaotic economic and social order'. In a following report he wrote that 'the anarchy and squalor of Western civilisation has come to a head'. The purpose of planning, he continued, was 'to reconcile personal

¹³⁶ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 4. Scientific modernity in particular had revealed concerns that included the power of genetic inheritance and the possibility of racial degeneration, the unknown forces of the unconscious that psychologists said may undermine rational thinking, and the unsustainability of the capitalist social system. Mansell has pointed to the continuities between interwar critiques of urban noise that relied on a pathologising of modernity by medical elites and discourses of modern civilisation at risk in Europe and America: 'Neurasthenia, Civilization and the Sounds of Modern Life: Narratives of Nervous Illness in Interwar Campaigns against Noise', in *Sounds of Modern History*, 278-304.

¹³⁷ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 3. A counter to the pessimistic orthodoxy of some analyses of artistic and literary gloom in this period is found in Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009).

¹³⁸ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, 198.

¹³⁹ Apart from economic planning, Overy highlights a turn to utopian politics of the right or left, moral and religious revival, world government and eugenic engineering: *The Morbid Age*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in the Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 1997), 145-6. See also Arthur Marwick, 'Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political "Agreement"', *English Historical Review* 79 (1964): 286-90.

¹⁴¹ Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning*, 144-54; Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 82-3.

freedom with an orderly community'.¹⁴² In other words, human society could not be left to its own devices in order to function properly. It seems then that the state of human civilisation after WWI prompted Nicholson to see birdlife as an example of a society at peace with itself. For Nicholson and Huxley as well, birdlife was a stable *model* of nature, with in-built evolutionary and ecological checks. The laws of human economics created cycles that tended towards failure, while the natural laws governing birdlife were manifestly successful in creating order, stability, balance and a harmony signified by song. While Nicholson and Huxley thought that a planned economy would be necessary to avert a human disaster, they also had a sense that humans would be better off if their civilisation included birds. By 1936, when another war was seen as a certainty by many, and Nicholson and Huxley were collaborating with Ludwig Koch on *Songs of Wild Birds*, they perceived a message of hope for a joint animal-human civilisation in the song-making of birds. There was certainty that birds could carry on without humans in the world, but could birds help human civilisation to continue?

Broadcasting civilisation

The process of broadcasting was itself supposed to be civilising; John Reith, at least, had seen it as 'part of the permanent and essential machinery of civilisation'.¹⁴³ One particular broadcast story from the wartime period allows for an exploration of the potent place of birdsong in the British mind, when another war with Germany seemed inevitable and many cast around for possible solutions to avert the crisis. Harman Grisewood was assistant director of programme planning in 1939 when he visited Berlin just before the outbreak of war and was sickened by the 'yellow-marked benches for the Jews in the Tiergarten'.¹⁴⁴ On his return he went to see the then director general of the BBC, Frederick Ogilvie, to report on his impressions. Grisewood recalls:

What he said was terrifying; I can still remember it word for word. He said: "You know the Germans are very sentimental people." I said, "Yes it's often explained to one that this is so." He then said: "Well, what we're going to do is broadcast the nightingale to the Germans. The cellist Beatrice Harrison will go into the woods near Oxford and play her cello. The nightingale will sing and we'll broadcast that to the Germans." I felt there was no point really in going on with the conversation.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 83. Overy sketches the activities of PEP as a response to the certainty across party-political lines that capitalism needed urgent reform (81-86).

¹⁴³ *Into the Wind*, 103.

¹⁴⁴ Harman Grisewood, *One Thing at a Time: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), 129.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in 'The Unspeakable Atrocity', *Document*, BBC Radio 4, 26 August, 1993. Cited in *Independent*, accessed 6 August, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/why-the-bbc-ignored-the-holocaust-anti-semitism-in-the-top-ranks-of-broadcasting-and-foreign-office-1462664.html>.

Grisewood felt that Ogilvie could not or would not digest the ‘horrible proportions’ of the situation, so instead had suggested that the broadcast to the Germans would be ‘a token of our peace-loving intentions’.¹⁴⁶ Grisewood was uncertain how serious Ogilvie really was, but several broadcasting scholars have cited this report as evidence within the BBC of narrow-minded complacency and a tendency towards appeasement in 1939.¹⁴⁷ British officials found it very difficult to believe the accounts of Jewish persecution told by refugees fleeing Germany, Tim Crook has argued.¹⁴⁸ However, I think in Ogilvie’s unguarded and emotional comment there is revealed a hope that if human diplomacy had not worked then this unique voice of nature that had moved so many British hearts on the wireless each spring for over a decade might be worth a try. Perhaps we must assume that Ogilvie did not really believe the song of the nightingale would soften hard Nazi hearts and persuade them to take a more peaceful view. But we can also assume that he was confident that such a broadcast would encapsulate all that was good about Britain, its values, its people. It would be a cultural exchange between Britain and Germany that could not be encapsulated in words, an attempt to communicate the essence of the British national character in bird and human music. It would be a reminder of British civilised values, even if the broadcast could not civilise the Germans who listened.

Should the nightingale singing with Harrison’s cello have been broadcast for the Germans it would have echoed something of the English mind and humour that Priestley had described as ‘rather temperate and hazy’, ‘blurred and kindly’.¹⁴⁹ The imagery of English character that was crafted during WWII in the broadcasts of Priestley and Noel Coward, and by George Orwell in his essays, prompted Raphael Samuel to comment that in their self-image ‘the English were a domestic people rather than a master race, home-lovers rather than conquerors. Their patriotism was quiet’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Grisewood, *One Thing at a Time*, 130.

¹⁴⁷ Tim Crook, *International Radio Journalism: History, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 196; Humphrey Carpenter, *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the Third Programme and Radio Three* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 67; Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 125.

¹⁴⁸ Crook, *International Radio Journalism*, 196.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Colls, *Identity of England*, 206.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 219.

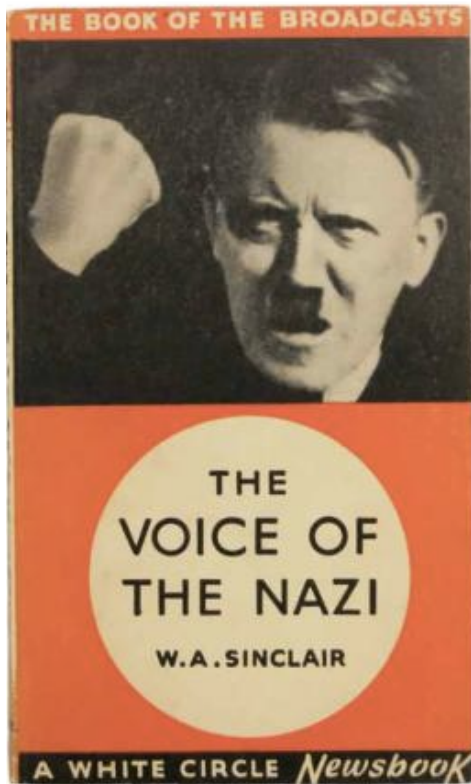


Figure 18. The book of the BBC broadcast series *The Voice of the Nazi*, in which the ‘quietly-voiced’ professor of psychology W. A. Sinclair attempted to expose the falsehoods behind Nazi rhetoric and the ideas behind them (London: Collins, 1940).¹⁵¹

This wartime mythologising of a peaceable and soft-spoken national character – though *England* was usually the reference point – was set against an equally simplistic depiction of what Brian Currid has called the ‘sonic icon’ of Hitler’s shouting voice and the deafening crowds at party rallies (Figure 18).¹⁵² Priestley said in his much listened to *Postscripts* broadcasts that the Nazi ‘loves bluster and swagger uniforms and bodyguards and fast cars, plotting in back rooms, shouting and bullying, taking it out of all the people who have made him feel inferior’.¹⁵³ In the *Daily Mail* Pat Murphy argued that Britons who listened to Hitler’s voice, due to be broadcast that day, would hear ‘the same merciless use of voice, and though some may not understand a word he says, still they will be able to identify that tone of menace, that barking attack on the senses’.¹⁵⁴ How much of or how often Hitler’s voice was heard on the radio by the British public is unclear, but in preparation for the 1939 BBC history of the Nazi movement, *The Shadow of the Swastika*, recordings of the speeches of Hitler, Goebbels and Göring were studied by the cast

¹⁵¹ *Radio Times* quoted in Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 152

¹⁵² Brian Currid, *A National Acoustics: Music and Mass Publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁵³ J. B. Priestley, ‘Sunday, 23rd June, 1940’, *Postscripts* (London: William Heinemann, 1940), 17.

¹⁵⁴ Pat Murphy, ‘Hitler’s Voice’, *Daily Mail*, 28 April, 1939, 10.

to create ‘exactly the tone of voice and emotional feeling’ that would bring home the essential nature of the Nazi movement.¹⁵⁵

British birds and their sounds were part of the constructed sonic opposition between ‘us and them’. Priestley’s Sunday evening *Postscripts* talks during the summer of 1940 have become as inseparable as Churchill’s speeches from the national mood at that critical period.¹⁵⁶ His talks remind us how the British brand of civilisation was constructed. Key was his way of talking about ‘all of us ordinary people’, most famously illustrated by the ‘people’s war’ vision elaborated in his 5 June talk about the Dunkirk little ships.¹⁵⁷ Everyday ordinariness was embodied in the tones and virtues of Britons: ‘simple, kindly, humorous, brave’, ‘imaginative and romantic’ and possessing ‘courage and resolution and cheerfulness’.¹⁵⁸ These were somewhat sentimental and idealised notions, for it was wartime. Complementary to these human qualities was the everyday birdsong that Priestley heard at the end of one of the loveliest springs he could remember: ‘Just outside my study, there are a couple of blackbirds who think they’re still in the Garden of Eden.’¹⁵⁹ When he encounters one dark night in a Hampstead pond a quacking duck and its ‘faint squeaking’ ducklings, he tells his listeners that he is able to understand the war as a battle between despair and hope:

For Nazism is really the most violent expression of the despair in the modern world. It’s the black abyss at the end of a wrong road. It’s a negation of the good life. It is at heart death-worship. But there flows through all nature a tide of being, a creative energy that at every moment challenges and contradicts this death-worship of despairing crazy men.¹⁶⁰

This little parable triggered by a mallard family draws out the gulf between the civilised and the savage, between nature and oblivion. Priestley had in another broadcast contrasted British virtues with those of the Nazi enemy, who were dehumanised and robotic: ‘thin-lipped, cold eyed’, ‘a kind of overgrown species of warrior-ant’.¹⁶¹ This was the dark side of modernity, modernity out of control, a civilisation gone wrong. Britain was proudly modern but had not abandoned its values and traditions. Priestley told his listeners that those blackbirds outside his window would be part of Britain’s future. They had been there ‘long before the

¹⁵⁵ Internal BBC communications quoted in Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 151.

¹⁵⁶ John Baxendale, *Priestley’s England: J. B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 140. A third of the country or more listened to the *Postscripts* talks.

¹⁵⁷ Priestley, ‘Wednesday, 5th June 1940’, *Postscripts*, 1-4.

¹⁵⁸ Priestley in his *Postscripts* talks from June to September quoted in Baxendale, *Priestley’s England*, 150.

¹⁵⁹ Priestley, ‘Sunday, 9th June, 1940’, *Postscripts*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Priestley, ‘Sunday 7th July, 1940’, *Postscripts*, 25-6.

¹⁶¹ Priestley, ‘Sunday, 9th June, 1940’, *Postscripts*, 7.

Germans went mad, and will be there when that madness is only remembered as an old nightmare'.¹⁶²

Conclusion

In 1936, for the first time, a collection of British birdsong had been recorded onto shellac. In fact it was song from the south country, as Edward Thomas had called it, where familiar friends like the blackbird, thrush, chiffchaff, robin and wren resided. Committing the sounds of these national favourites to gramophone record was the achievement of Ludwig Koch. His expert but exiled ear told him that British birdsong was superior to that of German birds and with the leading ornithologist of the day, Max Nicholson, he published his collection as a new multimedia format called the sound-book. Birdsong, now solidified and packaged for consumption in the urban home, became modern. Modern because this fixing of notes allowed and encouraged new kinds of concentrated listening to well-known but complex songs, over and over, in season or out. It was possible for the growing birdwatching public to get to know British birdsong better than ever before. Enthusiasts were encouraged to become knowledgeable in order to enhance their listening pleasure, but also their place as citizens who understood the essence of their country. Experts in birdsong agreed, though, that however much scientific study was undertaken, birdsong – even recorded birdsong – contained a magic that made it a universal pleasure for all classes.

Koch's recordings formed the core of his home front BBC broadcasts throughout the war. Over this period, everyday British birdsong would represent the 'authentic nation', with all its resonant rural myths, which were used extensively by the BBC and in propaganda films to rally morale. In the new sonic environment of wartime, listening took on an important role for the maintenance of safety, but it could also provide relief. Birdsong was one such relief, a familiar and friendly sound signature, and on the radio it could act as a kind of national anthem, without words and without a tune, one that anyone could have a stake in. During wartime, birdsong was heard as a patriotic sound, part of the British heritage being fought for. Birds sang out clear and defiant in the conflict; they carried on as all citizens had to. Listener responses suggested that Koch's programmes bolstered morale and he was given more air-time, moving beyond his initial *Children's Hour* audience to address the

¹⁶² Ibid., 7.

nation in prime weekend slots. The solace of birdsong appeared to unite listeners, when radio music and talk could divide opinion.

WWII was also a time when the symbolism of birdsong became a mark of civilisation. For Koch, birdsong was a kind of music, produced by creatures with refined aesthetic sensibilities. Some critics said that his recordings were ‘a work of art’¹⁶³ far superior to much of the popular music the radio played. Koch’s work was granted a place within the religious programmes on *Children’s Hour* on Christmas eve 1941, an occasion that seems to reach back to Reith’s association of birdsong with spiritual contemplation. In the modernising world, threatened by human barbarism, both Huxley and Nicholson argued in their own ways that bird life should be considered part of civilisation; humans might gain inspiration from their beauty and conduct. Nicholson’s leading role in the interwar think-tank PEP, which aimed to address social chaos through planning, was not untouched by his views of bird life as a model of order and stability. On the eve of war, the potency of the nightingale’s song reappears when the BBC’s director general Frederick Ogilvie wonders if the bird singing again with Beatrice Harrison might persuade the Nazis to take a more peaceable view. The idea was also a return to the wonderment of the live transmission, but most of all a demonstration of how closely British identity and birdsong were linked.

¹⁶³ Book Chronicle, *The Listener*, 4 November, 1936, 877.

Conclusion

...the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.¹

When the people considered in this research listened to nature, they heard something they felt part of and needed to draw close to them. Listening to nature put Britons in contact with an extraordinary dimension of otherwise ordinary everyday experience – they found, in times of crisis and threat, the messages of nature to be essential. If modern life in 1914-45 often kept the natural world at a distance, it also created conditions that meant humans needed its proximity and paid new attention to its sounds. These sounds of nature touched from a distance. Birdsong communicated energy and vitality, something of the nation and something eternal. The quietudes of nature brought peace, tranquillity and the chance for reflection. These ideas have emerged from this study of human cultural history in contact with the natural world. They are part of a vision of nature that the British people had during a period of technological innovation that ensured warfare could be conducted in newly violent ways and allowed broadcasting to become a medium of auditory culture in every home. The sonic disruptions presented by war and radio have given new meanings to the sounds of nature.

The objective of this research has been to better understand what the place of nature was in everyday lives when it was far from obvious how it could have much of a place at all. The human responses to nature could have been studied in ways other than listening, for example through literary depictions, or through an assessment of direct interactions with the countryside, or in activities like gardening. However, listening has been the focus because it entails a commitment to and a focus on sensory attention that I suggest reveals human emotions in culture in important ways. Moreover, many aural history scholars have highlighted the early twentieth century in Europe and America as a time characterised by social tensions concerned with noise. This noise has been conceived of as the rise of uncontrolled machine sounds in the public auditorium, as a metaphor for mass consumption and movement; as evidence, in other words, of modernity in full swing.

What we know, then, is that sound has been accounted for by scholars looking at this period chiefly with reference to the pleasures and pains of a modernising world. Histories of sound have often been about the suppression of noise or the management

¹ Raymond Williams, 'Ideas of Nature', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 67.

of noisy people, but the alternatives to noise, the other sounds or environments in which humans have operated, have attracted far less academic attention. In light of this trend, the question that arose for me was how did Britons survive the din, what sounds did they seek out for relief? From the scholarly literature we also know a good deal about what Alun Howkins has called the ‘discovery of rural England’ in the first decades of the twentieth century, where notions of Englishness were often attached to rural nostalgia.² The cultural tropes surrounding the national relationship with the countryside have been expressed in literature, poetry, folk music and pastoral classical music, as well as the politics of left and right. What I have found in my research is an everyday necessity expressed by all kinds of Britons to hear more than the buzz and crash of their modern world. This does not mean that listeners retreated to myth-making about English pastoral identity, though this is undoubtedly engrained in culture and is part of what I have observed. It means instead that Britons all the while *were* listening to nature. They heard not so much the romantic traditions of the past, but the passions of the moment and the promise and continuities of the future.

Social class and gender have both determined to some extent what has been found. All kinds of men seem to have tuned into the sounds of nature in the trenches. Yet, most often it was soldiers of the officer-class who were deemed most eligible and appreciative of quiet country healing regimes, though I have shown too that the ranks had occasional access to such environments and benefited from them. The question of the cultivation of radio listener was central to debates about broadcasting and I have shown that an appreciation of nature’s sounds was believed to be open to all classes in the 1920s and during WWII. How gender determined the hearing of nature is harder to say. Sources from the period I have explored dwell on the experiences of men, not women. Both could be equally noisy perhaps, though men of course are largely credited with the creation of industrial machines, the telephone system, typewriters and broadcasting, not to mention the technologies of war. Men of high social standing were apparently the experts in sound – acousticians, broadcasters, composers – and thinking men were the ones who had the opportunity to make the most demands for silence in which to do the work of the mind. We know little, then, about the sonic preferences of women in private or public spheres during this period, but it is important to recognise the significant muting of the female public voice that suffrage only gradually changed.³ Though this thesis does not reveal particular gender distinctions in listening to nature, it is possible to argue from the findings of the

² Howkins, “The Discovery of Rural England’.”

³ Mary Beard, ‘The Public Voice of Women’, *London Review of Books*, 20 March 2014, 11-14.

chapters about WWI that nurses were the guardians of quiet for recovery, even if it is unclear how much this role was adopted or imposed.⁴ An intriguing question remains, however, and this concerns the possible understanding of nature as an all-powerful feminine force. Literary intellectuals at least – Hugh Massingham, D.H. Lawrence and Robert Graves, for example – embroidered the ancient idea of the Earth Mother, Mother Nature or the Mother Goddess into their writing in the 1920s and 30s.⁵ Yet, in this study it is by no means clear if nature's quiet voices were heard as female ones. Indeed, there are hints that some listeners of spring birdsong recognised a male performance. And John Reith intimated that for him the ordered sonic character of the universe was overseen by the powerful masculine 'Omnipotence'.

This thesis makes a new contribution to the understanding of British life in the shadow of war during 1914-45. The key idea that has emerged here is that in order to endure and manage the technological intensities of modern life – the chaos of war and its aftermath; the cultural challenges of the new mass medium of broadcasting – Britons drew the sounds, quietudes and rhythms of nature ever closer to them, and put them to work with heightened meanings, to secure the future. The sounds of nature, more than any other experience of it, could do this because they presented nature living and vital in the moment. These sounds interrupted human thought, defining the present as moments in motion. They brought to the human a sense of nature's progress, even though sometimes the sounds were articulated as quiet or silence, or were represented as moods of peacefulness or tranquillity. The song of a bird, the murmuring quietude of the countryside, the silence that might occupy the heavens, all these could be read as indicative of the continuities of the natural world, pointing forward to the next breath, the next day, the next season. The listener knew they too were part of this universe of vibrations. This sense of nature derived from its sound was quite distinct from the English rural idyll of the imagination, which was ancient and static and celebrated in landscape painting. More importantly, this traditional image of nature rooted in geography has not been articulated by the subjects of this study with the same urgency as has the witnessing of the clear-and-present sounds and rhythms of the natural world. This aliveness of nature was carried forward by many into the new world ahead, and to do so was a technique of being modern.

⁴ Florence Nightingale's ideas about containing noise on military wards was echoed in WWI nursing books like Amy Millicent Ashdown's *A Complete System of Nursing*. Christine Hallett has recently argued that nursing practice in WWI was responsible for creating the conditions of cleanliness, peace and order, in which psychological and physical healing could take place: *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁵ Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 71.

The thesis also makes a new contribution to the field of historical sound studies. It complements and brings additional dimensions to existing scholarly narratives of WWI and interwar sound and listening, the latter of which tend to have concentrated on urban experience, not least the debates about machine noise. More broadly, the thesis challenges sound scholars to take an interest in a wider set of sonic atmospheres. If the human ear was oppressed by modern noise in the first half of the twentieth century, it was at the same time able to perceive and give meaning to more than that category of sound. Most sound studies literature concentrates on either the city or the countryside, yet in accommodating both domains this new work emphasises that in this period of modernity the sounds of nature asserted themselves widely in British society. The thesis shows that modern listening encompassed pre-modern sounds, which had all the more purchase on minds during and after WWI. Birdsong, quietude, silence and nature's rhythms have been retrieved from the conservative and preservative politics of R. Murray Schafer and given a place in everyday lives, co-existent with mechanised auditory textures. The thesis emphasises the continuing demand in British society for new versions of pastoral in modern times, versions that combined cultural and environmental notions of nature.⁶

Survival, recovery, transcendence, national identity

If we consider the evidence from the chapters in turn now, the ways in which the sounds of nature have been employed by Britons in an effort to gauge and protect themselves from the threats that the modernising world presented in 1914-45 become clear. Each chapter offers something new. First, I add to knowledge about the ways men survived in the trenches by showing the importance of connecting to nature with the ears. Second, I bring into the open the use of pastoral quiet for recovery after the psychological shocks of war. Third, the ways in which the BBC incorporated ideas of silent nature in order to normalise but also spiritualise the new public service were demonstrated. And finally, the broadcasting of recordings of British birdsong during WWII was shown to be a way to secure British values under threat.

Birdsong: survival in the trenches

Trench warfare in France and Belgium created a physical and psychic environment that had not been experienced before by soldiers. No one was prepared for combat in these conditions. Of all the terrible sense impressions that trench life made on

⁶ Terry Gifford identifies this theme in twentieth century British literature in his 'Afterword: New Senses of "Environment", New Versions of Pastoral', in James and Tew, *New Versions of Pastoral*, 245-7.

soldiers, it was the intensity of artillery shelling and its effects on minds and bodies that was recorded most in their writing. The cultivation of sonic knowledge about shells and other screaming ordnance was soon understood to be necessary for survival, even if action based on this knowledge was limited. I have developed the thinking of Eric Leed and Yaron Jean in this respect.⁷ However, my new insight is that listening out for danger brought into the auditory orbit of trench listeners the song of birds. From these surprise encounters, officers and men drew inspiration from the performance of such small creatures that seemed to display the admired British qualities of resilience and an ability to ‘carry on’ through adversity. In the desperate realities of trench life, bird life triggered all sorts of imaginings and fantasies that sustained minds under intolerable stress.

Dug into the landscape, exposed to the turning seasons, it was not unusual for soldiers to sense solace in nature’s momentum. Birdsong would herald spring, but so too would green shoots that persisted even among the destruction. The nightingale would announce another day survived, the lark a new day breaking, though these sounds brought sadness and exasperation as much as moments of euphoria. Often accounts reveal that soldiers felt they were part of the natural world themselves, not simply observers of its activities. It is possible, then, to see in the way men wrote about themselves in the trenches a kind of entrainment of human with natural rhythms. Some soldiers found comfort in the idea that they too lived not just in sympathy with nature’s rhythms but also were somehow synchronised with them. They could, and perhaps needed to, consider themselves part of these advancing rhythms – on the Front it was clear that at any moment death might curtail all further participation in nature’s continuity. But at least the scheme of nature would carry on. Writer and artillery officer Edward Thomas, in his slim, sparse diary, recorded his morning routines of hearing the birds and getting on with shelling the enemy. Birds and bombs defined the format of his day, the bird routines at least making the bomb routines more tolerable.⁸

There was more to listening to nature than the reassurances of daily and seasonal repetitions. Men found deeper meanings in birdsong. This ancient sound called to mind eternal and universal rhythms. For some men, the flow of notes from a bird pointed into the future, beyond the immediate threat of shell bursts and death. Robert Sterling, Royal Scots Fusilier, wrote to a friend in Glasgow that in the nest-building of

⁷ Leed, *No Man’s Land*; Jean, ‘The Sonic Mindedness of the Great War’.

⁸ Thomas, ed., *Edward Thomas*, 139–72.

a thrush and in the lark's song he had found a link to what he called the 'Normal and Unchangeable Universe'.⁹ The flow of nature and its unstoppable energy brought comfort amid the deathly turmoil made by men. The lark, of all birds, suggested in its song high above the trenches a heavenly escape from the stasis of the mud. Men spoke of these birds as angels. But they brought the tangible escape homeward to mind too. The lark's song could fly a man home across the Channel where the bird was a common meadow singer and the future for the lucky soldier lay in wait.

The chiming musicality of birdsong experienced in the trenches sounded out in stark contrast to the cacophony of battle and the sinister pauses and silences that followed. From Mary Douglas' anthropological thinking, one can speculate that birdsong served for soldiers to purify the defiled soundscape of trenches, to clear the air of explosions, screams and cries.¹⁰ In addition, to the extremes of deafening noise and silent waiting, both of which were pervaded with fear, birdsong for some men interjected with familiar voices and friendly repetitions. A highly unpredictable and disordered sound world, that appeared to resist any kind of patterning, could in fact be reordered by birdsong, which returned known sounds to the ear, helping men assign some kind of structure to the next few minutes at least. One might also say that the sounds of danger on the ground were offset by songs celebrating life in the sky, which was itself intact and unharmed.

Bird life was heard afresh in the trenches, perhaps heard by men who would not ordinarily have engaged with such sounds. In this environment, all sounds were given heightened significance. The ones soldiers wrote about came from birds and bombs. This chapter provided a new perspective to thinking about enduring and surviving trench experience. Survival in the trenches was a matter of emotions prompted into life by nature's voice, as well as sheer determination and steel.

Recovery within pastoral quietude

In Chapter 2, the listening environments that were explored are almost the antithesis of the trench battlefield. They are at home, in Britain, and almost always involve the sense of peaceful verdancy suggestive of the pastoral. After the war was over, there was perhaps more reliance on quiet and silence as restorative sonic milieu. This research has made explicit these often overlooked and seemingly common-sense sounds. Much of what has been found points to a reinvigorated affinity for traditional,

⁹ Quoted in Housman, *War Letters*, 263.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44-5.

pre-war if not pre-industrial moods and methods. These comforts were essential, but not retrograde. They were needed for damaged soldiers and for society to heal and move forward again.

Throughout WWI, medical insight into the phenomenon of shell shock was confused and treatment was limited to experimentation. Physicians did not understand the symptoms they were seeing and military authorities would not accept them as evidence of pathology. Even in the crisis of war, however, the gentle balm of country atmospheres found in grand houses and their gardens, in parks and squares, or ideally outside the towns and cities in a 'country gentleman's house',¹¹ were seen to be beneficial to shell-shocked officers who could appreciate these settings. Some shell shock hospitals for the ranks offered gentle outdoor or craft work as part of a recovery programme, but there was concern that such approaches would not be conducive to a return to duty. In the absence of a consensus on anything more innovative, physicians fell back on versions of the rest cure and the quiet it provided. Quiet rest had an ancient medical heritage as well as endorsement from Florence Nightingale and from American ideas about how to treat neurasthenia. In some respects, shell shock was viewed as a disease of modern life, one that would respond to a return to pre-modern modes.

These medical ideas about nerves needing quiet rest were strongly informed by cultural beliefs that can be found in the literature and politics of early twentieth-century Britain. Britons, or at least the English, held a perception of themselves as quiet types, softly spoken, with a preference for fewer words rather than more. Concepts of Englishness had a foundation in the timeless rural scene – this was where the English gentleman came from. The countryside before WWI signified 'order, stability, naturalness', Alun Howkins has argued, and this notion appealed to both the political left and right.¹² To return soldiers to the embrace of pastoral tranquillity was to send them back to a pre-industrial world where the nerves could absorb the wholesome moods and rhythms that the nation was built upon. Officers were reconnected with the genteel ancestral land. And the continuing concerns about the pre-war degeneracy of the masses could also be allayed with a faith in the restorative quietudes of non-urban places. In the privileged mind at least, moral purity was typified by pastoral peace and quiet.

¹¹ Lumsden, 'Nerve-Shattered Pensioners', 9.

¹² *The Discovery of Rural England*, 89-92.

Such myths were supported by an influential literary and poetic tradition. The sublime power of nature and its sounds had been instilled through the canon of Romantic poetry. But what has been most revealing in this research is the emphasis given to anti-urban and anti-industrial imaginings from prominent literary figure John Galsworthy. As editor of the wartime periodical devoted to the care and recovery of disabled servicemen, which included those with psychological problems, Galsworthy's ideas are revealing of the feelings in circulation. Though his vision for the magazine and his prose and poetry contributions read as sentimentalism and nostalgia today, drawing heavily as they do on the revitalising beauties of nature, they are also prescriptive of what he and others thought was needed to return veterans to life. The buzz of towns, the factory system with its speeding up, the claustrophobia of industrial work, were not fit for anyone, certainly not damaged soldiers, Galsworthy asserted. Only a reconnection to the glories of an English landscape of 'flowers and nightingales, under a lee of a group of pines' would do.¹³ In this kind of rhetoric, there seemed to be a certainty that modernist interpretations of society were of no use to a nation trying to rebuild its strength after the catastrophe of this war. Jay Winter has argued that a return to traditional patterns, romantic forms and religious motifs was a necessary way to make sense of the war and cope with bereavement. While modernism's explorations of dislocation, paradox and the ironic could express anger and despair, and did so in many enduring ways, they could not heal, Winter has argued.¹⁴ There was support for this traditional view in political as well as literary spheres.

Stanley Baldwin liked to evoke a past national soundscape that was pure and simple, and paced by humans and nature, not machinery. In 1924 the Conservative prime minister resorted to myth to conjure a powerful national ideology of England as the countryside and the countryside as England. The very depths of English nature were anchored in the sounds of the corncrake, the smithy and the scythe, he said in a speech that gained wide popular purchase, though few lived in earshot of such sounds. Baldwin was interested in the aesthetic ideals of rural Englishness, not the commercial and employment prospects of agriculture. But immediately after the war, finding suitable work on the land for damaged soldiers who were often deemed unfit for urban and industrial work, was a prime economic concern. The containment of pension claims was at play here, but what emerges too is a new attention to quiet rest and work on the land. Gentle work routines were seen by government authorities to be

¹³ Galsworthy, 'Heritage: An Impression', 305.

¹⁴ *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 115-6.

therapeutic for the individual with shell shock as well as necessary for the national economy. For the few who were interested in doing so, this kind of programme was also intended to keep the worst psychiatric casualties out of lunatic asylums. This mixed picture is clarified somewhat by the case of the Enham Village Centre for non-officer ranks, established in Hampshire in 1919. This is a place that curiously until now has not been given any scholarly attention.

Enham was a therapeutic village community started from scratch with a few dozen men, most of whom were shell-shocked. It was showcased in Galsworthy's magazine as a model of how men should be treated in natural surroundings. The *British Medical Journal* reported Enham's healthy situation to be comprised of a handful of farms, with a post office, village hall, smithy and cottages. From this village idyll, a new community of men in recovery with their wives and children was built. Visitors described 'an atmosphere, an elusive something' at Enham 'composed of a beneficent alluring quietude'.¹⁵ Ex-servicemen did light horticultural and farm work, carpentry and basket making. The gentle rural rhythms and routines of such work were part of the rehabilitative programme. While the only one of its kind, Enham was a success. By the mid-1930s there were some 400 men and their families living and working in the village of 62 new cottages funded by the royal family and the British Legion. Enham can be thought of as a pastoral utopia in miniature, not unlike the type that William Morris had imagined in *News From Nowhere*. If for some Enham was a viable pastoral model of the nation in recovery it was because, as Major Reginald Harding put it, 'the war has turned men's minds towards a country life'.¹⁶

Perhaps more important for their popular uptake were the unofficial moves into the countryside after the war was over. Enham may have proved to the political and medical powers that rank-and-file men could benefit from and respond to pastoral therapies, but many ex-servicemen knew that they needed a change from urban life. Few shell-shocked men were given the chance to recover in the quiet of nature, but many who were less badly affected sought it out for themselves. This was most notable in the plotland movement, especially around London, that Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward have documented so well. Plotlanders were in search of the simple pleasures of fresh air, local farm produce and the 'tranquillity of a riverside haven or woodland setting'.¹⁷ Quiet was a key ingredient.

¹⁵ 'A Rural Life for Health and Restoration', *Fruit Grower*, 187.

¹⁶ Harding, 'Land Settlement and the Disabled', 471.

¹⁷ Hardy and Ward, *Arcadia for All*.

It was never silence that was part of the rehabilitative programme. Men were still haunted by the sinister silences of the Front. Rather, what was sought were the traditions of quiet bound up in notions of English character and English landscape, reinforced by the cultural productions of art, literature and music. And the war had forced people to return to the haven of tradition. The 'peaceable place on the other side' of Samuel Hynes' 'great chasm' of war was revisited and reclaimed.¹⁸ Though the war had challenged and changed so much, in order to move forward as individuals and as a civilisation, the essential parts of national culture would have to be retained. This is how a civilised nation would be reconstructed, by looking backwards to go forward.

Sublime silence: radio spiritualised

This chapter looked at how the establishment of public service broadcasting was intertwined with concepts of nature, great and small. It considered radio as a new amplified noise impinging on the lives of many Britons and the BBC's post-war role in managing the introduction of this system of mass communication. The debates surrounding broadcasting were of excitement, speculation and fear. On one hand, radio was seen to be a truly modern medium in its harnessing of science and technology and its ability to challenge the norms of space and time to engage an entire nation of listeners. But if broadcasting was alive with possibilities, its crackles and pops were also full of unexplained presences. The idea of invisible radio waves fluxing through minds and bodies was alarming. National broadcasting was criticised for its ability to intervene in any public and private space, its mechanical voice contributing to the modern blare. Critics were concerned that rather than contributing to culture, radio was a threat to it, with standardised and trivial outputs.

John Reith's BBC had this public debate to contend with as it tried to establish itself. As his vision for his project gradually developed, Reith began to align both the content and the medium itself with concepts of nature. He formalised the thinking in his 1924 manifesto, *Broadcast over Britain*. It is likely that Reith sought to weave nature's sounds into the fabric of his public service to repel the criticisms in circulation, to normalise the new and to dissipate anxieties about a 'broadcasting craze'. But Reith wanted broadcasting to live up to Matthew Arnold's idea of culture offering something sublime that everyone could be inspired by, and relaying human voices and human music could only go so far in this respect. Reith was in the process of working out a picture of public service broadcasting that would accommodate his beliefs, not least

¹⁸ *A War Imagined*, ix-xi.

his religious ones. For Reith, one of the things that the modern world was missing was a commitment to religion. In nature, Reith began to see a non-denominational theology, which could be brought into the material and immateriality of radio sound.

In the first year of BBC work, which began in late 1922, there were already plans afoot to broadcast the 'sounds of the country', as Reith called them. But it took the provocations of critics like Wilfred Whitten, editor of the popular literary magazine *John O'London*, to galvanise Reith. Whitten proposed an 'exchange of experiences between the silences of Nature and the hum of the city' – he wanted the sounds of nature to be sent into people's homes, not city voices.¹⁹ It also took the public excitement arising from the live broadcast of a nightingale in song with Beatrice Harrison's cello performance to convince Reith that the sounds of nature could have a special place in broadcasting ideology. Reith was not interested in exciting his audience, however. It was the response of so many who found the bird in song on their wireless set to be transcendent of everyday routines and worries that was important to Reith. For many, the nightingale's song seemed to stand apart the ephemeral voices and music that everyone knew. It could never be part of everyday broadcasting but it showed what broadcasting might be and that everybody could appreciate such magic.

Reflecting on the nightingale broadcast, Reith presented the sound as highly symbolic. The sound was not song, but silence: 'In the song of the nightingale, we have broadcast something of the silence which all of us in this busy world unconsciously crave and urgently need'.²⁰ If Reith's broadcasting had contributed to the busy world, he felt it could also mitigate against the overload with careful programming. The idea that broadcasting could have anything to do with silence was curious, but Reith was searching for a grand narrative for his medium. It is significant that he does not speak about quiet, only silence. This must in part be connected with the status of silent reflection introduced to the public in the Armistice ritual, broadcast by Reith in 1923. Reith would have seen the part that radio culture could play in re-civilising human hearts after the war. But to associate the nightingale's song with silence rather than simply quietness was to link it to the spiritual silences of the Christian faith – in other words to prayer, contemplation and communication with God. Birdsong, for Reith, and probably for many others, was the voice of all nature; it communicated nature's messages, and was a voice close to the divine.

¹⁹ Whitten, 'The Lure and Fear of Broadcasting', 865.

²⁰ Reith, *Broadcast*, 221.

There was more, for Reith felt there was a spiritual essence within the medium of radio itself. His fascination with the physics of radio was matched with his desire to find within it a spiritual foundation and purpose. In his book, he developed the proposition of a cosmic-nature theology within broadcasting. He was not alone with these ideas. The poet Alfred Noyes relished the drama of broadcasting being proof that ‘the Supreme Power was in communication with every part of the universe’.²¹ Reith was a little more modest in suggesting that the mechanisms of radio broadcasting were able to put listeners at home in touch with the cosmos and the presence of the divine. Radio waves could do this via the ether (a contentious substance that was said to hold the universe in an ordered and perfect pattern). Reith did not suggest that broadcasting opened a two-way communication with the heavens, but that there was potentially access to it. We are left with the idea that the nightingale offered a special silence to listeners but also that the medium itself could offer a connection to cosmic silence. This infinite realm brought to listeners a purity and stillness even more ancient and authoritative than the bird’s song. But celestial silence need not be feared. Reith had made clear that the ‘companionship of solitude’ that this silence provided was a route to contemplation and perhaps revelation.²²

Though this chapter concentrated on Reith’s thinking in large part, it reflects the moods and intellectual currents of the post-war period that influenced him, especially in relation to science, philosophy and cultural productions. Reith’s broadcasting concepts did affect the programming that listeners experienced during the week. His Sunday schedule was the quietest of all. Reith in large part silenced his own medium on the Sabbath, with only a few hours of religious programming in the afternoon and then again in the evening. If broadcasting was to be a tool for improving modern life, it could not be too modern. It would need to pause to allow thought and other activities to resume. Those concerned with the project of broadcasting looked to the long-standing spiritual authority of nature’s silences to counterbalance the overload that could too easily invade daily life.

Confirmation of Britishness at war

The final chapter returned from the sometimes metaphysical to the sounds of birds in song, recorded in the mid-1930s and broadcast during WWII. If there were concerns about the process of recording and reproduction of birds diminishing their songs, I have not detected them. Presumably, for ornithologists, the chance to linger over

²¹ ‘Radio and the Master-Secret’, 550.

²² Reith, *Broadcast*, 221.

birdsong and study it that recording allowed outweighed any worries about fidelity. When a reviewer from *The Listener* magazine said of Ludwig Koch's first sound-book 'They are worth a dozen of the music everyone knows. They are worth twelve hundred cage-birds', he seemed to be commenting about the value of the sound in terms of uniqueness and authenticity.²³ Such recordings were indeed unique in Britain in 1936, to gramophone and to radio listeners. The debates that were heard in the 1920s about the 'tinned nightingale' on the wireless sounding unlike the real thing or suffering from its mediated ubiquity seemed to have passed. Commoditised birdsong was gladly accepted as a gift and could be a 'natural' part of radio sound.

Koch's work to record and publish wild British birds was a way of getting to know his new country. When he moved to London as an exile from Nazi Germany in 1936, his work was in part an investigation of differences. At the same time, it was a project to explore Britain, or at least southern England, through the songs of its birds. To do this, Koch worked with the leading scientific and ornithological minds of the day, Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson. These men's significant political and establishment influence helped get Koch's recordings published. But they also framed the endeavour as one of science and knowledge-making, which was not Koch's main interest. His enthusiasm stemmed from his emotional response to what he saw as his songsters' artistry and performance. For Huxley, and Nicholson especially, each species required careful study to gain the greatest appreciation and pleasure. The sound-books were designed with this in mind – Koch had gone to great lengths to isolate each bird in song to create a sound specimen, and the book gave timed guidance to the listener so that the structure of a song could be understood. For all this, both scientists acknowledged the mysterious enchantment that birdsong brought to all people, 'however uninstructed' they may be.²⁴ There was democracy in birdsong in that it was open to all. However, it was in the knowing of birdsong, an emblem of British natural heritage, that one might bolster a sense of citizenship. To know your country, by walking in it and listening, or by studying gramophone recordings, was a way to know the land and a way of being a modern British subject.

During wartime, such ideas about citizenship were all the more powerful. Birdsong's symbolic association with national identity came to the fore as did the immediate pleasure and solace it gave to the listener. These trends are evident in the public responses to Koch's radio broadcasts, which he made throughout the war, beginning

²³ Book Chronicle, *The Listener*, 877.

²⁴ Nicholson and Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, xiii.

on *Children's Hour*. As the war continued, Koch was given more air-time and it seems that Britons of all kinds and classes appreciated hearing birds on the wireless at home. Listening during wartime was fraught, however. Sirens, aerial bombing, careless-talk campaigns and blackouts created much tension, but also new kinds of listening habits and knowledge. Like the trench sonic mindedness that soldiers acquired, civilians in home front cities during the Blitz and throughout the remainder of the war learnt the sounds of danger and the sounds of safety or relief. The radio itself was a key tool for securing morale by providing news about the war, diversion and escape. Koch's broadcasts appear to have been able to unite listeners in ways that human music and voices could not. If everyone could appreciate Koch's birdsong, it was because he had recorded the ordinary voices of the garden, park and heath that many had an everyday sense of. Those voices seemed to fit with J. B. Priestley's down-to-earth Yorkshire accent and his broadcast topics of ordinary people working together. They fitted too with the patriotic celebrations of rural England that the BBC made much use of during the war. But Koch's birdsong was more than confirmation of a romantic past worth fighting for. It was an emblem of sonic national character thriving today – it was an everyday reality more than an everyday fantasy. Koch intended his broadcasts to demonstrate that 'even bombing could not entirely shatter the natural peace of this island'.²⁵ Birdsong might be a peaceful expression of the nation, but those songs would also stand up to German aggression.

For men like Koch, Huxley and Nicholson, who knew birdlife so well, they saw in it a long-proven social harmony and order, demonstrated most clearly in its joyous musical culture. Alongside humans, birds were part of civilisation. For Huxley, birds were friends and companions to humans struggling with the demands of the modern mechanised world. As war approached, Nicholson saw birds as perfect moral beings. They offered a lesson. Nicholson's work in the early 1930s for the economic think-tank PEP, which was responding to fears of social chaos, was not untouched by the inspiration of birds as models of civic order. Koch, of all things, admired the aesthetic capacity of birds – they produced their own culture. In fact, Huxley recognised the importance of Koch's collection of hundreds of bird and animal sounds when he commended this material to UNESCO as a contribution not only to British but international culture. Indeed, though the findings of this thesis suggest that an affinity for birdsong was a particularly British trait, Denmark and Sweden undertook their own national projects to record their birds in the mid-1930s, broadcasting them and

²⁵ *Memoirs of a Birdman*, 71.

supplying schools with the recordings.²⁶ Birdsong, notably within cage-bird traditions, certainly had a strong place in late nineteenth-century German culture, as we saw with Carl Reich's recordings that would have informed Koch's own interests as a boy.

During the crisis of WWII, birdsong could even be imagined as a force for good that might civilise hard Nazi hearts. The director general of the BBC, Frederick Ogilvie, had wondered what the effect might be of broadcasting a nightingale in song with Beatrice Harrison to the Germans. It would at least have been a way of communicating the kind of people the British considered themselves to be. The idea reveals something important about British perceptions of national character and their relationship with birdsong. As an instrument of appeasement, perhaps birdsong could say more than a human voice, make contact in a different way. The thought seems to have crossed Ogilvie's mind, and it was part of a mood that J. B. Priestley went on to articulate in his *Postscripts* broadcasts. The mood was one that wanted to assert British values as the antithesis of Nazi thuggery. If Nazism was a case of modernity gone wrong, an unnatural aberration, its sonic character and tone of voice reflected this in its shouting and bullying. In contrast, the English, and by extension British, brand of civilisation was softly spoken, like Priestley himself. It reflected a kindness of ordinary people who appreciated the beauties of nature.

These sonic characterisations placed birdsong above human communication. But it also makes clear that birdsong mirrored a British tone of voice and could stand for British values. In 1943, the propaganda film *A Demi-Paradise* re-enacted the famous nightingale and cello performance during a German bombing raid over London while BBC engineers ensured that it went out despite the bombs dropping. In that scene, it was as if the song of the bird functioned to neutralise the sound of bombs and their effects. The bird spoke over the bombs. Harrison later recalled in her memoirs that the point of the scene was to show how everything carried on. The bird and the cello, the BBC, the listeners around the country, were all united.

Listening to the sounds: birds and quiet

Having highlighted the main findings and conclusions that can be drawn from the chapters when considered together, the thesis will close with a short discussion of the key sounds that have been listened to. Birdsong has been the pre-eminent sound of nature to be revealed by this research. The sound of the wind, waves and leaves have

²⁶ Copeland, Boswall and Petts, *Birdsongs on Old Records*, 6, 30.

hardly had a hearing in the source material studied. However, the elusive sound of quiet has been proved to be prominent in the culture of the period, though to notice it has required a certain sonic mindedness in the attention paid to sources. Notions of quiet and silence have often been intertwined, but there are important differences in these concepts when they are unravelled.

Birds

This study has demonstrated how birds have been heard as much as seen. In Britain, they have been the only wild creatures to be encountered regularly in the city and the country. Their familiarity in song and flight perhaps explains their powerful symbolic presence in human culture. This study has been concerned with the experience of listening to nature, but hearing a bird is always to some extent touched by the symbolic. To witness song has been to hear a new beginning – of the day, of the seasonal cycle. The auditory signals provided by cuckoos and swallows have in some way been understood to be about sexual energy and renewal. Humans have sensed this and felt refreshed by it, taken onwards by it. But for this connection to occur, Britons, under the spell of birdsong, have had to consider themselves to be part of the picture of nature. This work has found a communication between humans and birds, though largely a one-sided dialogue in which soldiers and civilians and broadcasters have felt addressed. The independence of birds, their mastery of the air and their sound-making, have inspired many imaginings. Birds have been ‘good to think’ with and in Britain perhaps the chief animal with which to contemplate the human estate.²⁷ Two cultural assumptions about birdsong have come to light most strongly in this research, one about national identity and another about the divine.

Birdsong has been heard as the sound of British nature. The idea that the heart of the nation lay in its rural heritage meant that birdsong could stand for the entirety of Britishness or, more commonly, Englishness. But this version of national identity was an ordinary, everyday one that everybody was part of. The extraordinariness of birdsong was for everyone and could be appreciated by everyone. It was not affected by the class divisions that characterised much rural ideology. Perhaps this was because birdsong was everywhere, not least in urban and suburban streets and gardens. The British claimed all birds as their own. In the trenches, birds were recognised from home and assumed to be British. The nightingale was taken on as a British favourite, even though it was a migratory bird that spent much of the year

²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 89. Peters writes that: ‘Even more than angels, animals have probably been the chief object for contemplating the human estate’: *Speaking Into the Air*, 241.

elsewhere. The voices of birds were seen to echo not a British but an English tone of voice, which was quiet and kind. Sometimes the voice of the bird was allowed to speak on behalf of people or instead of people. It could communicate things that humans could not. In this there was the idea that birdsong was the herald and ambassador of universal nature. Birds did not speak on behalf of God – though some described them as angels – but they were assigned a moral purity and an authority of the ages. Birdsong was a voice that had spoken before and might outlive the human. It suggested eternal continuity, which could be a great comfort in the modern, fast-changing world of human affairs.

These associations of birdsong with national identity and a universal nature that connected to the divine, underpinned the place given to birds and their song in wartime and within early broadcasting. In the crisis of trench warfare, birdsong had a place in helping men survive the ever-present threats to life and limb. To hear birds was a necessity amid the noise and chaos. Without it, men were left with the sounds of shells, screams or ominous silence. These impossible rhythms needed the order and sanctification that birdsong filled the air with. Perhaps we must question how much birdsong could really be heard in the trench world. But the idea of birdsong was undoubtedly vivid in the minds of men fearful of surviving the next few moments. We can ask too how much nightingale song could be heard in the airwaves of 1920s broadcasting. But, again, the prospect was sufficiently tantalising to capture the imagination. The sound of a nightingale emerging from the wireless machine was a respite from the stream of man-made sounds. It endowed the wireless with magic and consolation beyond the everyday.

Quiet

Quiet has been central to this research. However, few scholars have considered it. Silence has asserted itself in thought, as a definitive marker of the cessation of life and, paradoxically, as the voice of eternal life from a God presiding over the stillness of the universe. Quiet is different. Its source is almost always terrestrial nature and for this reason it is often full of life. However, the natural sounds that quiet can contain are heard as ‘noiseless’. The sounds of leaves and the creasing of pigeon wings were allowed to inhabit the Armistice silence – they transformed silence into the quiet of nature, a more reassuring sound. The regenerative power of this kind of quiet has been highlighted by this research.

Quiet was an important milieu for rest and recovery after war. Bed rest was useful but pastoral quietude could heal. This outdoor quiet was fresh, wholesome and moral. It took bodies and minds away from the urban and the industrial where degeneration was still feared. The pre-industrial rhythms of the countryside and rural work were prescribed for the shell-shocked, but the nation as a whole gravitated towards the quiet countryside, which felt like the authentic heart of Britain. After all, quiet was a sonic characteristic of the English and perhaps the British too. In particular, it was a condition claimed by the upper and middle classes. To keep quiet and to appreciate the quiet of the countryside were considered by some to be attributes that only they understood. However, this work has found entitlement to quietude to be broader, finding its way into shell shock recovery for non-officer classes and the country at large after WWI.

Listening, 1914-45

This thesis has found that listening to nature was a continuous feature of the period. However, listening needs, sensitivities, practices and meanings changed. The development and refinement of trench listening in order to understand the dangers signalled by the sonic apparently led men to hear birdsong. The intensity of listening practices seemed to pull out of the ‘continuous roar’ the sound of birds, and this work suggests that such sounds were given heightened meanings in the conditions of the trenches. It may have been that the sounds of birds were especially important to somehow rebalance the overwhelming noise of artillery. After WWI, those who had fought and many of those at home had a new sense of sound. Some of the listening skills and sensitivities cultivated in the trenches were counter-productive at home, when a car back-fired for example, but were slow to undo. Many simply wanted to hear a soundtrack different to the endless urban hum.

From the end of 1922, the BBC cultivated a new nation of radio listeners. The BBC experimented with ways of being quiet, even being silent. In the nightingale’s song was found a sublime sonic standard for public service broadcasting. Listeners delighted in the idea that nature could be brought into the home, even if it was hard to hear. But by the next war, the medium was more transparent and recorded birdsong on the radio was enchanting but unremarkable technically. Some listeners would work to develop their knowledge of birdsong but most listened for pleasure. By this point, millions listened to Ludwig Koch’s programmes – children, families, bird-lovers and factory workers. In them they heard an indefatigable British spirit.

During a period in British history when war and its spectre were ever-present, nature *was* heard and listened to. Its sounds were not lost in modern turmoil and technological noise. Rather, they were listened to intently, perhaps because of the stresses of living during this time. The calls of birds and the quietudes of the countryside have been heard with new ears – these old sounds were sought out in light of the new. By attending to the human responses to nature's sounds we know more about how nature itself was needed for survival, for healing, to enliven culture and to imagine a modern, civilised future for Britain.

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